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# Teaching children to write and read in Waldorf schools

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A well-established principle of Waldorf Education is that children's development is compromised if we bring intellectual teaching too early. Waldorf teachers congratulate themselves that they wait until the seventh year to begin formal schooling, but according to the principles of child development out of which Waldorf Education arose, and on which much of our practice has been based for a hundred years, teaching children to read and write at seven is not ideal; they are still not ready. Convention and state expectations made it necessary in 1919, just as they do now, to introduce literacy teaching at an age not too far from what was generally considered normal, so a compromise was needed. Steiner suggested that, because physical development reaches a certain completion at seven, it is less harmful if we can wait until then. But according to Steiner, this is still a compromise: we cannot immediately unleash any kind of teaching scheme on children as soon as they reach their seventh year without doing any harm. According to modern teaching principles and methods, starting earlier means getting ahead; everything should be taught explicitly and systematically; and nothing can be left to develop of its own accord. Proponents of synthetic phonics refer to impressive research showing that it produces better results than other methods of teaching literacy, which is why it has been adopted so widely in mainstream education. However, the validity of this claim depends on what we mean by 'better results' and 'literacy'. This paper explores these ideas.

## KEYWORDS

Waldorf education, literacy in Waldorf schools, Steiner education, teaching literacy, teaching literacy through art, teaching reading and writing, adaptive teaching

## Introduction

Young children are primarily imitative. They perceive written letters and words initially as images and their impulse is to imitate the *look* of writing. If they see people reading, they will imitate it by sitting with an open book and moving their eyes or heads from side to side. They also notice very early, from watching adults read aloud, that writing relates to spoken language, and they will mimic the purposes of writing by trying to use it to communicate. In 1967, educator John Holt, described a story 'written' by a five-year-old girl:

It is a mass of letters, or letter-like shapes, arranged more or less roughly in lines on the page, but not in words, that is, groups of letters. These lines of scribbles ... meant a great deal to [her]; she meant to say something, and thought she was saying something, as she wrote them. ... in time more of her symbol shapes were actual letters, and she grouped them more and more in word-like bunches. But she always *meant* something when she wrote them and always expected [someone] to know what she had "said." (Holt, 2017)

Many children now will not experience this stage of imitative ‘writing,’ because literacy instruction begins so early. Modern teaching principles and methods are based on the idea that starting earlier means getting ahead; everything should be taught explicitly and systematically; nothing can be left to develop of its own accord (Robinson, 2017).

Conversely, a basic principle of Waldorf Education is that children’s development is compromised if we bring intellectual teaching too early. Waldorf teachers congratulate themselves that they wait until the seventh year to begin formal schooling, but according to the principles of child development out of which Waldorf Education arose, teaching children to read and write at seven is not ideal; they are still not ready. Rudolf Steiner, speaking in 1919:

If you consider the letters we use for reading and writing, you will realise that there is no connection between these letters and what seven-year-old children do naturally ... If we confront young children with these letters, we present them with something alien that in no way suits their nature. (Steiner, 2004, pp. 58–59)

Even so, convention and state expectations made it necessary in 1919, as they do now, to introduce literacy teaching at an age close to what was generally considered normal, so a compromise was needed. Steiner suggested that, because physical development reaches a certain completion at seven, it is less harmful if we wait until then. But according to Steiner, this is still a compromise; we cannot immediately unleash any kind of teaching scheme on children as soon as they reach their seventh year without doing any harm:

Let us be clear about what it really means to force something foreign into a child’s organism ... people fail to perceive the damage done ... merely by introducing reading and writing to children in a wrong way. (Steiner, 2004, pp. 58–59)

## Developmental stages and how we teach

When reading this, we have to acknowledge that writing is not foreign to seven-year-olds in the twenty-first century. From birth, words, in advertising, signage, packaging, shopfronts, screens and toys, have been part of their environment. But perhaps the alien encounter with the system of alphabetic writing remains, and it’s here that *how* we teach becomes important, because although some children will be able to grasp the system and its rules at seven, others will not. Some of these will have specific learning difficulties, and systematic approaches to teaching are then useful, but others are just not ready.

Beginning in 1954, the Zurich Longitudinal Studies<sup>1</sup> demonstrated that in any class of rising-seven-year-olds whose development is

measured against age-related averages, there will be a range of about three years, and the range increases as the children get older. Put simply, in any class, some children are much further along in the measured aspects of their development than others, *and this is normal*.

In light of this, it is problematic to generalise about what a seven-year-old ‘should’ be able to do. Some will not have moved out of the imitative stage; curiosity will have led most of them to learn to write and read their own name; many will have worked out for themselves that letters are symbols that represent particular sounds; some may have taught themselves to read; almost all know what writing and reading are—that they convey meaning and that adults can interpret them. Consequently, learning to read and write is anticipated by most children with great excitement.

It seems obvious that, however we decide to approach it, our teaching should not dampen this enthusiasm; it should not appear to beginners as something difficult and complicated; neither should it seem dull and tedious to those who are ‘further along.’ It should meet them at whatever point they have reached, take hold of their enthusiasm and carry them forward, acknowledging and building on what they already know.

## Systematic methods of teaching literacy

In spite of Largo’s research and that of many other educators, current modes of education stand in stark contrast to this ideal. John Holt used the example of speech to highlight what he saw as the mistakes inherent in systematic methods of teaching reading and writing:

Suppose we decided that we had to “teach” children to speak. ... First, some committee of experts would analyze speech and break it down into a number of separate “speech skills.” We would probably say that, since speech is made up of sounds, a child must be taught to make all the sounds of his language before he can be taught to speak the language itself. Doubtless we would list these sounds, easiest and commonest ones first, harder and rarer ones next. Then we would begin to teach infants these sounds, working our way down the list. Perhaps, in order not to “confuse” the child ... we would not let the child hear much ordinary speech, but would only expose him to the sounds we were trying to teach. Along with our sound list, we would have a syllable list and a word list.

When the child had learned to make all the sounds on the sound list, we would begin to teach him to combine the sounds into syllables. When he could say all the syllables on the syllable list, we would begin to teach him the words on our word list. At the same time, we would teach him the rules of grammar, by means of which he could combine these newly learned words into sentences. Everything would be planned, with nothing left to chance; there would be plenty of drill, review, and tests, to make sure that he had not forgotten anything.

Suppose we tried to do this; what would happen? ... most children, before they got very far, would become baffled, discouraged, humiliated, and fearful, and would quit trying to do what we asked

<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1954, ‘The goal of the Zurich Longitudinal Studies was to gain a better understanding of the norms of child development. [...] This ambitious research project involved a team of paediatricians, development specialists and biostatisticians, who recorded the development of more than 900 children from birth to early childhood.’ Detailed information about these studies can be found at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7901945/> (Largo, 2021).

them. If, outside of our classes, they lived a normal infant's life, many of them would probably ignore our "teaching" and learn to speak on their own. If not, if our control of their lives was complete, ... they would take refuge in deliberate failure and silence, as so many of them do when the subject is reading. (Holt, 2017)

Children want to learn independently. If experiences are forced on them their motivation to learn will be lost. ... they want experiences that will further their development, starting from the stage they have already reached. (Largo, 2019, p. 67)

When we think about how to ensure that all children become literate, we have to be aware that, if we take all six- or seven-year-olds through a synthetic phonics programme, based on the belief that they will not learn to read unless we do,<sup>2</sup> we risk denying all of them the opportunity to experience this as a personal discovery. Jean Piaget:

Each time one prematurely teaches a child something he could have discovered himself, that child is kept from inventing it and consequently from understanding it completely. (Piaget, 1926, Part 2)

Those children who can already read, or who get the idea right away, are often frustrated and disappointed if they have to go through a programme of steps designed to lead them to what they have already worked out for themselves. The rest are denied the possibility of doing that. For all of them, the whole subject of reading and writing can become tainted with negative feelings. The children's long-term relationship with reading and writing is at stake here; what is lost through failing to develop the habit of reading for pleasure is immeasurable and can have life-long consequences. It is not enough to be *able* to read and write; we have to also make sure, as far as possible, that once they have the skills, children still *want* to read and write.

Holt goes on to cite a plan (thankfully abandoned before it reached the classrooms) in Chicago's public schools to teach two hundred and eighty-three separate reading skills that had been 'identified by experts' (Holt, 2017). I mention this only to illustrate how far systematic methods can go when they are devised without imagining the child's experience. This exchange from a current synthetic phonics website<sup>3</sup> illustrates how this approach persists:

Q: Is it still OK to get children to think of words beginning with a particular sound?

A: No! The whole point of teaching synthetic phonics is to improve the children's reading and spelling. Thinking of words ... does not do this. Also, children are unlikely to generate words of

the type you are currently teaching them to blend/segment. e.g. if you are teaching simple CVCs containing 'ch' (e.g., 'chip'), a child might suggest 'cheese', 'chocolate', 'change' and these are totally inappropriate for their blending and segmenting skills at this point. (Lesley Clark's Synthetic Phonics, 2024)

Proponents of synthetic phonics will refer to research showing that it produces better results than other methods of teaching literacy,<sup>4</sup> which is why it has been adopted so widely in mainstream education. However, the validity of this claim depends on what we mean by 'better results' and 'literacy'.

It is understood that decoding and literal comprehension are the most rudimentary aspects of literacy and that mastery of these skills does not in itself make us literate. The path to becoming truly literate is an intricately woven fabric of skills, sensitivities, and experiences; 'the stage they have already reached' and being 'further along' are really indefinable. Some children may be able to read and spell, but have few books in their homes and never see their parents reading. Without the example in the adults around them, they will less often opt for reading as a pastime, and their facility with written texts and literature will tend to remain at the decoding level. Other parents read for pleasure and to their children every day. These children, whether they can decode or not, will have a deep understanding of story structures, tropes and literary styles and are likely to understand and use a broader, richer vocabulary than children whose parents do not read (Kalb and van Ours, 2012).

At the other end of the spectrum of learning theories from systematic teaching is 'unschooling' which asserts that learning is as natural as breathing; many children teach themselves to read, and since literacy teaching begins at such an early age, it is impossible to be sure that most children who grow up in a literate society would not do so, given time (Holmquist, 2016). This view, and the *laissez-faire* approach to reading it implies, have at times been part of mainstream education, but in the current educational climate, they are considered too unpredictable, to the point of being irresponsible. Free, creative thinking, however much it is valued, is expansive, often illogical, unpredictable, involves leaps of imagination and individual interpretation, and when the aim of education is to ensure that children acquire specific, prescribed skills to meet measurable targets at the 'right' age, it is hardly surprising that more controllable, systematic programmes of teaching are favoured. The effect of this narrowing of the aims of education to what can be measured can go far beyond the acquisition of literacy, numeracy or any other skills.

## Teaching through art and adaptive teaching

John Dewey called art 'the most effective mode of communication that exists' (Dewey, 2017). A great deal of artwork is produced in Waldorf schools, and this is perhaps what has led to the misconception that 'teaching through art' means that the children produce beautiful

<sup>2</sup> From a phonics training: [Teaching Phonics in Early Childhood Online Course \(2020\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> Synthetic phonics, also known as blended phonics or inductive phonics, is a method of teaching English reading which first teaches the letter sounds and then builds up to blending these sounds together to achieve full pronunciation of whole words.

<sup>4</sup> A longitudinal study reported by [Johnson and Watson \(2005\)](#) found that a group taught by synthetic phonics had better spelling, word reading and comprehension than a group taught by analytic phonics. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/14793/1/0023582.pdf>.

books, paintings, and craftwork alongside their ‘proper’ work. In fact it means making the arts the vehicle through which we teach everything. Rudolf Steiner explains why we would want to do this:

... pictures refuse to communicate themselves in the narrow, rationalistic way that is possible with concepts and ideas. ...A picture or an imagination works in a living way, like a living being itself. We may have come to know one aspect or another of a living person, but ever and again he will present new aspects to us. We shall not be satisfied, therefore, with definitions purporting to be comprehensive, but we shall endeavour to look for characteristics which contribute to the picture from different angles, giving us increasing knowledge of the person in question. (Steiner, 1923)

A work of art is not definitive; it characterises; it does not force its ideas on us but presents itself as something we can come to know; it renders more, the more we engage with it.

When we teach with images and with imagination ... children take as much instruction as they can bear. A relationship arises like that between eating and being satisfied. ... a child will not eat more than is bearable, spiritually, because the organism spontaneously rejects what a child cannot bear. (Steiner, 2004, p. 70)

When an idea is presented in a picture, story, poem, descriptive language of any kind, song or drama, the children receive, understand and respond to it in individual ways. They are all immersed in the narrative and imagery of the stories, the musicality of poems and songs, the practical activities of drawing pictures, forms and letters, all of which suit the nature of even very young children. A child who does not yet understand how written language works will still learn to draw the letters and to write beautifully. The concepts can be brought again later in different ways, until he can take them in. The child who has already grasped them will still need to practice forming the letters and develop her handwriting, but she will also be able to write freely out of herself, and opportunities should be given for her to do so. What each child learns is not—cannot be—prescribed, defined or limited. This creates opportunities for everyone to learn and has unlimited depth for those who look for it. This, by its very nature, is adaptive teaching.

By teaching through art, all children can learn to write and be given the opportunity to discover how to read by themselves; this is the best way to develop functional literacy skills while also fostering a feeling for the beauty of language and a love of reading. Our observation skills, understanding of child development and a feeling of responsibility for the children in our care, if taken seriously and properly developed, will ensure that children who do not make this discovery for themselves do not go unnoticed, and, as explained, systematic teaching can then be useful.

Our aim in teaching in this way is still that all children become functionally literate, but this objective is only part of the much broader purposes of education, which we should not be willing to sacrifice for the sake of early reading.

## Innovation in Waldorf education

Over time, Rudolf Steiner’s educational indications have been used to create a so-called ‘Waldorf curriculum’ that was never his intention, and which does not take into account the range of abilities and cultural, familial, religious, lingual and socio-economic backgrounds that are to

be found in every class today. Pressure from official bodies with their own age-related requirements<sup>5</sup> has led to a growing tendency for Waldorf teachers to conform to mainstream expectations and methods. This is especially the case where their understanding of their own practice is inadequate. Waldorf teachers are accused by ‘progressive’ educators of resisting change, but this is a misunderstanding. Waldorf practice is not prescribed; innovation and individual interpretation have always been fundamental to it. Rudolf Steiner:

If you go into one of the first classes, you will see writing taught through painting and drawing; ...[in another] first class and you will see something different; this teacher allows the children to run round in a kind of eurythmy, getting them to experience the form through their bodily movements ... And it is possible to do this in a third or fourth way. ... every teacher must present lessons as an individual. Just as life appears in manifold variety, so, too, teaching based on life will take different forms. ... If you lay down abstract principles, you expect to find the same activities in every classroom. If your principles are taken from life, you know that life is varied and that the same thing can be done in different ways. (Steiner, 2004, p. 62)

We can waste a lot of energy trying to protect our traditional practices from compromise when it is these principles, not a particular curriculum content, that need defending. Without this understanding, practice is not renewed or diversified and becomes obsolete, and when it is questioned, we have no basis on which to argue its validity.

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The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, there is a requirement to teach literacy through synthetic phonics in schools in the United Kingdom. This is a requirement of the Ofsted inspection framework 2019 and applies to Waldorf schools that are inspected by Ofsted. Independent schools inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate are not required to do so.

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