



The 7 Big Waldorf School Criticisms

By Chris Drew (PhD) / October 23, 2022



Waldorf education is a controversial approach to teaching and learning. It emphasizes prolonging childhood innocence, natural technology-free environments, and positive group relationships.

Advocates of Waldorf Education (also known as Steiner Education) highlight that it can help children's creativity, support motivation for learning, and remove pressures on children in the 21st Century.



However, there are many detractors. The emphasis on the ‘natural child’

means there are often high rates of unvaccinated children within Waldorf schools. Parents also worry that the lack of emphasis on academia until later in school could put Waldorf students at a disadvantage compared to their contemporaries.

Below, I’ll outline the big 7 criticisms of Steiner schools.

Top 7 Waldorf Education Criticisms

1. No Early Focus On Academics

The Steiner-Waldorf approach to education attempts to protect children from the pressures of the outside world.

These include pressures like:

- Curriculum outcomes
- School tests
- Adult news and information
- Politics
- And so on...

Consistent with this philosophy, many Waldorf schools don’t teach traditional ‘basic skills’ in literacy and numeracy until later ages. Up until about age 7, most learning occurs through storytelling, drawing, and oral communication.

For young children at Waldorf schools, there is greater emphasis on social skills, creativity, arts, and practical sciences. This generally leads to greater [intrinsic](#)

motivation in the sciences and stronger social skills^[1].



For many of us, this sounds like a great idea. We generally believe that children *should* be protected from academics at a young age and that the world puts too much pressure on children.

But there are many parents who also want to make sure their parents compete academically with their peers. If a child misses out on the first few years of learning, there's a fear that students will fall behind and find it impossible to catch up.

Fortunately, many studies of the success rates and exam results of Steiner-Waldorf children tend to show that this criticism doesn't hold water. For example:

1. **A Stanford University study**^[2] of one Waldorf school in Sacramento found that the students at the school were outperforming the average non-Waldorf educated child on [standardized tests](#) by 8th grade.
2. **A New Zealand study**^[3] published in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* found Waldorf-educated students caught up with their mainstream peers in reading by age 10, despite a later start.
3. **A US study**^[1] published in *Current Issues in Education* found that Waldorf school students on average underperformed in grade 3 but overtook mainstream students by grade 8.

2. Lack Of Technology

The Steiner-Waldorf approach has from its early days focused on natural environments. There is even a strong focus on *beauty* and a *natural aesthetic*,

meaning you'll see most toys are made of wood. The walls will be full of artworks made by the children themselves.



But you won't see many computers. Technology is generally avoided up until about age 7. Even after this, technology is de-emphasized. Waldorf schools prefer to focus on being in the present, using tactile objects, and social interaction.

But, we live in a world where just about every job requires technological skills. Many middle-class western children are using tablet computers from a young age (even learning [fine motor skills](#) through navigating touch screens).

As technology becomes more and more integral to 21st Century life, the gap between unplugged Waldorf schools and tech-engaged mainstream schools widens. Waldorf students won't be [digital](#) natives and will be at a severe disadvantage in a technological world.

3. Low Vaccination Rates

There has been a long-held public perception that Waldorf schools tend to have high rates of unvaccinated children. In fact, even Public Health England^[4] has declared Steiner schools to be an “under-vaccinated population group”.

The reasons for low vaccination rates among Waldorf children are likely multiple and complex, but among them are:

- **A belief in the ‘natural child’.** Vaccines could be considered to be unnatural and therefore should be kept away from children.



- **A belief in a ‘god-given’ immune system^[5].** There are some religious undertones to the Waldorf philosophy, which are discussed below.
- **A belief in karma.** Childhood illness may be the result of karma and not something that can or should be prevented through vaccines^[6].

I suspect at least one or more of the above points would be challenged by many parents who send themselves to Steiner schools. So, I’d caution that these are not universal or even generalizable points among Steiner-inspired schools or parents. In fact, Waldorf school tend not to give guidance either way on vaccinations^[5].

4. Racism Of Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925), the German father of the Waldorf philosophy, had very uncomfortable views when it came to issues of race.

First, he believed that white people had an “intellectual life” while black people had an “instinctual life”^[7]. In other words, white people were more intelligent.

Second, he believed in a racial hierarchy. You can climb the hierarchy through reincarnation. If you were a good black, perhaps you’ll be reborn white in your next life.

Third, he believed in segregation, and that black people were not welcome in Europe.

That’s uncomfortable stuff!

Furthermore, BBC Newsnight reported in 2014 about allegations of racism within UK Steiner schools. You can watch the full report here:



BBC Newsnight - Full Programme on Steiner Schools, Racism and Bullying



In response to the Newsnight report, the UK's Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF) stated^[8]:

“While the superficial reading of a handful of Steiner’s voluminous, extensive lectures present statements that appear racist in modern terms, none of these occur in his educational writings. Our schools do not tolerate racism.”

There is also a pattern of Steiner-Waldorf organizations highlighting that Steiner’s writings may have had some racist statements in them, but the *general direction* of the writings were inclusive.

Fore example, the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE)



emarks^[9]:

“Anthroposophy, upon which Waldorf education is founded, stands firmly against all forms of racism and nationalism. Throughout Steiner’s work there is a consistent anti-racist sentiment and he frequently described racist views as being anachronistic and antithetical to basic human values and dignity.”

Similarly, SWSF states^[8]:

“Racist views do not accord with Steiner’s longer term vision of a society in which such distinctions would be entirely irrelevant & modern Steiner Waldorf schools deplore all forms of intolerance, aiming to educate in a spirit of respect & to encourage open-hearted regard for others among the children they educate.”

Thus, while accusations of racism in Steiner’s philosophy are well-founded, it appears Steiner-Waldorf schools of the 21st Century want to vociferously reject

racism of all kinds.



5. Religious And Philosophical Underpinnings

The Steiner-Waldorf educational philosophy has religious undertones. How much these undertones are put into practice in contemporary Waldorf schools is unclear. However, a look at Steiner's work appears to show:

- Belief in reincarnation and karma.
- Encouragement of children's spirituality, vaguely defined.

Steiner's concept of anthroposophy emphasizes using science to understand human spirituality.

This all seems quite vague. Nevertheless, many parents find it disturbing. There are reports from a Steiner school in Brooklyn where anthroposophy was employed to see whether a child had 'old bones'^[10]. There's even a website^[11] for a group called People for Legal and Non-sectarian schools (PLAN) who are disturbed by the occult nature of anthroposophy.

However, Steiner schools officially do not follow religious doctrines in their schools. They merely acknowledge that children can have spirituality. As the Association of Waldorf Schools for North America (AWSNA)^[12] notes, Waldorf schools:

"...espouse no particular religious doctrine but are based on a belief that there is a spiritual dimension to the human



being and to all of life. Waldorf families come from a broad spectrum of religious traditions and interest.”

6. One Teacher For 5 To 8 Years

Teachers tend to stay with students for multiple years in Waldorf schools. According to AWSNA, a student can expect to have the same teacher for five to eight years.

There are pros and cons to this approach. As a positive, students will be able to develop deep relationships with their teacher which could give them more comfort and a greater sense of security. Waldorf schools emphasize strong interpersonal relationships.

However, teacher turnover can be a positive thing. All teachers have their strengths and weaknesses. A new teacher may help a student to achieve breakthroughs in learning and development because they offer a different teaching style.

It can be good for a student to experience a range of different teachers and adult influences to gain a breadth of experiences of different teaching personas. New teachers bring fresh perspectives.

If a child doesn't gel with their teacher, they're still stuck with them for up to eight years – that could be tough.

7. Waldorf Schools Are Expensive



Many [public schools](#) and school teachers are influenced by Steiner's philosophy, which is taught in teacher education degrees (alongside other approaches such as the [Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches](#)).

But, generally speaking, Waldorf schools are private.

Because Waldorf schools are private, they are often too expensive for working-class and minority families. For example, [this article](#) discusses one Waldorf school with tuition fees of \$19,000 per year. (I'm sure many are much cheaper).

This expense is inconsistent with the general Steiner-Waldorf belief in social justice (despite the above criticisms, there are also many statements about social justice in Steiner's philosophy).

Many Waldorf advocates are well aware of the fact cost is a barrier to access to Waldorf schools and that it runs contrary to the social justice emphasis [13]. So, this is both an external and internal criticism of Waldorf schools that most Waldorf advocates will acknowledge.

Conclusion

By this point, you're probably wondering what my perspective is on these Waldorf school criticisms. I've tried to present a nuanced journalistic approach throughout the article.

But, I'm inclined to conclude with this observation. The nature of this article has meant the criticism have been over-emphasized and the positives overlooked.



I've taught the Steiner-Waldorf approach to education for many years to university students – from Bachelor of Teaching all the way up to Masters of Education students. I've also had friends and mentors who spent their working lives in Steiner-Waldorf schools.

And overall, most of the above criticisms don't reflect the everyday reality of the movement. From my experience, it's a generally progressive, holistic, and well-meaning philosophy that values creativity and music and challenges the fast-paced world of the [21st Century](#).

The Waldorf-inspired teachers I've come into contact with are usually very nurturing, caring people.

With that said, I tend not to be an enthusiastic advocate of the approach overall. I believe there is plenty to embrace from it ([play-based learning](#), a caring environment, storytelling) and some things I tend to reject (obsession with 'natural' aesthetics, spiritualism, a general 'hippie vibe').

And that's why I'm more inclined to embrace a Montessori approach over a Steiner approach on balance, while remaining inspired by the community-mindedness and nurturing elements of Waldorf schools.

Footnotes

[1] <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/scope-report-waldorf-inspired-school.pdf>

[2] <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/scope-report-waldorf-inspired-school.pdf>



[3]

<http://www.newcastlewaldorfschool.nsw.edu.au/uploads/1/4/5/1/14518514/sugg-ate-schaughency-reese-2012-ecrq.pdf>

[4]

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/849538/PHE_Measles_Guidelines.pdf

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/nyregion/measles-outbreak-new-york.html>

[6] <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/waldorf-schools-are-inherently-racist-cults-91193d1fbef6>

[7] <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-28646118>

[8] <https://www.steinerwaldorf.org/steiner-waldorf-schools-fellowship-press-release/>

[9] <http://steinermentary.com/steinerlens/race.html>

[10] <https://nypost.com/2013/12/15/parent-fury-at-brooklyn-hex-ed/>

[11] <http://www.waldorfcritics.org/>

[12] <https://www.waldorfeducation.org/waldorf-education/faqs-about-waldorf>



[13] <http://waldorfy.com/affordability-and-waldorf-education/>

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