

Waldorf and Montessori Combined

A New Impulse in Education

James W. Peterson

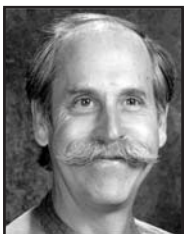
Montessori and Waldorf approaches are usually considered mutually exclusive, but the best qualities of each can be effectively blended, even in public school classrooms.

If you were going to enroll a preschooler or kindergarten in school and wanted to investigate *all* the educational options out there, the task would be vast. It soon becomes clear, however, that besides public education, there are two private options that stand out in philosophy, publications, and popularity. And these two options have representative schools in all fifty states. These are Waldorf and Montessori schools, which are also the two most widespread educational private options in the entire world.

Yet, these movements, the first characterized by artistic and imaginative group work, and the second by beautifully designed materials which help students independently explore their learning environment have been at odds for over seventy years. A grand old Waldorf professor, Dr. Leo Hierman of Northern Illinois University, told me that while lecturing on Waldorf education at Northwestern University in the 1970s, Montessori teachers used to sit in the back row and heckle him!

But are these seemingly opposite and antagonistic movements *really* mutually exclusive? In this article I would like to share my forty years of teaching experiences, in both public and private settings, in which I successfully blended both the Montessori and Waldorf approaches in my self-contained classroom.

A little background might set the stage for this discussion. By the time I started my teacher preparation at age twenty-one, I was already grounded in an encompassing, spiritual philosophy of life, blending Eastern and Western spiritual teachings and practices. It was quite natural that I sought out some educational philosophy that might at least recognize spiritual dimensions of child development. Many of



JAMES W. PETERSON has been teaching elementary school for 40 years in both private and public school settings. Experienced in both Montessori and Waldorf educational approaches, Jim currently teaches in a small, rural public school in California. He is the author of *The Secret Life of Kids*.

my friends were Montessori teachers, and Montessori seemed to have the spiritual dimension I was looking for. However, only training in preschool education was available at that time in the United States. And I knew I was not interested in working with two- or three-year-olds! Few elementary Montessori jobs existed and the only training in 1970 was in Bergamo, Italy—and the course was mostly taught in Italian! Such training didn't seem workable.

One day I went to observe at the Berkeley Montessori School, which was run by a good friend of mine. I told him about my Montessori predicament over lunch. He said, "Jim, if you are really looking for a spiritually oriented educational philosophy, you should check out Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf education."

I immediately went over to the University of California Educational Library and they had virtually every lecture cycle Rudolf Steiner had given on education that was in print — as well as several transcribed lectures long out of print.

As I embarked on a course of self-study, I was thrilled by what I was reading. This was what I was looking for! And I also quickly got the idea that I might be able to simply use Dr. Steiner's principles in a public school. After all, Dr. Steiner said that to teach one only needed a nice barn, a few children, and a teacher's developed imagination! He also mentioned that he hoped his ideas would some day enliven state-run public schools.

In 1970, therefore, I applied and was accepted into a teaching credential cum Master's Degree program at U.C. Berkeley. One might ask, "Why didn't you just go and get Waldorf education training?" Somehow I had in me an advocacy for public education: I had worked for three summers at a Pennsylvania camp for underprivileged children, and I was well aware that such children could never afford a nice, private Waldorf or Montessori school. So I felt the "real work" needed to be done in the public schools. I was just a kid and excited about the possibilities.

But there was something else. The more time I spent with Waldorf teachers, and Rudolf Steiner followers in general (called anthroposophists), the more uneasy I became. Steiner's philosophy (Anthroposophy) was familiar to me because I had

studied Theosophy for some years. However, Steiner's approach was very "Western" and mostly Christian oriented — in fact, there was a distinct disapproval in Steiner's group of any Eastern path or Eastern ideas. Since I had become a follower of the Indian spiritual leader, Meher Baba, I didn't quite feel comfortable in anthroposophical circles. However, at the Sacramento Waldorf School in 1970 I found wonderful support for my Waldorf-in-the-public-schools idea. Franklin and Betty Kane, the head teachers at the school, offered me encouragement and practical ideas. Much later, by the way, I was to spark off a national debate by publishing in the Waldorf journal, *Education as an Art*, an article titled, "Waldorf Education and the Public Schools." A great many Waldorf teachers were not nearly as supportive of my work as the Kanes were in Sacramento.

In my public education training one of my teachers was a brilliant professor, Mary Collins, who advocated having children work independently with manipulative materials in so-called "learning centers." These centers were to be set up in different areas of the classroom and were designed to feature manipulative work in math in one area, language arts in another, and perhaps science experiments in yet another. This educational approach seemed very familiar to me since I had seen the same method used in the many Montessori schools I had visited.

My university training in a nutshell consisted of writing papers about how Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf curriculum and his vision of the stages of child development were compatible with and relevant to public education. At the same time, I was learning how to set up and manage a classroom where children worked independently with manipulative materials.

Historical Background

Waldorf

Perhaps a little historical background about these two great educational movements, Waldorf and Montessori, might be helpful. Rudolf Steiner was an Austrian seer and spiritual teacher who lived from 1861 until 1925. The headquarters for his international Anthroposophical Society has been located in Dornach, Switzerland, near Basel, for nearly a hundred years. The movement is well known for creat-

ing ideas and techniques for bringing spiritual principles into practical, everyday professions. Thus, there is an anthroposophic approach to farming and gardening, anthroposophic medicine, dance movements, styles of visual art and architecture, and, finally, education.

Steiner believed, like other spiritual teachers, that the interests and questions of the students should help determine the direction and nature of teaching. When farmers approached Dr. Steiner, for example, and asked, "How does your philosophy relate to my practical work in horticulture, he gave an agriculture course that later flowered into biodynamic gardening.

The same principle applied to education. In 1919, when the owner of the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory in Stuttgart asked Dr. Steiner if he would develop a school for the children of the factory employees, Steiner agreed. When Dr. Steiner gave the initial training courses for perspective teachers, much of the focus was on the characteristics of child psychological and physical development as illuminated by his spiritual vision and occult insights. One of these insights was that children, before they lose their baby teeth, should not be studying reading or math; they are better off in the home environment and not even in school at all. Already one can see some vast differences with Montessori, whose methods are based on a good preschool program. I remember so clearly a Montessori leader coming to me after my son was born. She told me, "I can't wait till Blake is two and I can get him into my classroom."

Steiner's ideas, in the meantime, become relevant when the child is six or seven years old. For the school-age years (seven to eighteen) Rudolf Steiner developed on an extremely detailed curriculum in which subject matter is designed to complement and harmonize with the growing state of the child's inner consciousness. Thus the child is taught in ways he can deeply connect with, such as using fairy tales as the springboard for early language arts work — or studying a science unit comparing people and animals at an important developmental juncture at age nine. Steiner also expected that Waldorf classrooms would be very much driven by the authority, insights, and inspiration of the teacher. The teacher brings in stories, poems, songs, and a sense of lively

imagination and wonder to enliven curriculum topics. Written work is almost always approached with colorful drawings and artistic, often multicolored, writing. There is an artistic thrust to almost every lesson in all curricular areas — even math and science. And the lessons are always based on the premise that the teacher's knowledge of developmental stages and his/her inspiration can work with curricular impulses that uniquely nurture the whole child.

Montessori

This is quite different from the Montessori Method. Dr. Maria Montessori was an Italian physician born in 1870. As a member of the University of Rome's psychiatric clinic, she became intrigued with the education of children with special needs. She was appointed director of a school for the mentally handicapped, where she was able to prepare them to pass the state examinations in reading and writing. She realized that the methods she was developing might also benefit normal children. In 1907 she opened her "Casa de Bambini" and started refining her materials, which allowed children to work at individualized tasks at their own individualized pace.

Far from Steiner's notion that the inspired teacher should present special lessons to the children, Montessori's radical idea was that the teacher should take a back row seat: "Education should no longer be mostly the imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities" (Montessori 1988). These human potentials were to be released by the children working at their own pace on individual projects and materials:

Scientific observation has established that education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences upon the environment. The task of the teacher becomes that of [creating]... a specially prepared environment, and then refraining from obtrusive interference. (Montessori 1988)

It is interesting to note that J. Krishnamurti and Sri Aurobindo Ghose, through their own independent insights into the growth, development, and workings of the child-mind, advocated approaches to ed-

education that are more similar to Dr. Montessori's ideas than to those of Rudolf Steiner. Both sought to free the child's inner potentials by allowing him/her to follow independent, individualized programs in school. Sri Aurobindo's so-called "free progress system" particularly articulates this view. In fact early in 1910, Sri Aurobindo (n.d., 17) wrote in a pamphlet called "A System of National Education" that

the first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster, he is a helper and a guide. His business is to suggest and not to impose. He does not actually train the pupil's mind, he only shows him how to perfect his instruments of knowledge and helps and encourages him in the process.

Compatible Systems

Even though the individualized approach of Montessori and the more group-oriented, teacher-driven approach of Rudolf Steiner may seem different, even opposite, I view them as compatible and complementary. It doesn't take much philosophical insight to realize that children, and adults as well, learn in both ways. Quite obviously people can learn from the teacher. And equally obviously, people can learn from interacting independently with the environment. Yet somehow Steiner and his adherents, and Montessori and her followers believe that these two ways of learning are mutually exclusive! Rarely do Waldorf kids work with any manipulative materials except artistic ones. And equally rarely are Montessori kids given structured, teacher-centered, group lessons. It seems perfectly clear to me that a balanced approach to education would include both lively, inspiring group work and time to explore a carefully prepared environment of Montessori or other manipulative materials. This made sense to me in my first teaching assignment in 1971, and it still makes sense to me in my current (and no doubt last) teaching assignment in 2010.

In my early days in the public schools, I had little practical knowledge of either Steiner or Montessori. My Waldorf understanding arose from lots of reading in my college years, from weekend workshops in the Sacramento area, and from visits to the few Waldorf schools in the San Francisco region in 1971. I had

no real experience of Montessori, except I had seen classrooms filled with beautiful, wooden Montessori materials. I sort of imagined Montessori to be the "gold standard" of the learning centers approach. But in the public schools I stuck to my games, blocks, and homemade learning tools, since there was clearly no administrator willing to spend the money to supply me with expensive Montessori materials. And I also had little working knowledge of the art of properly presenting Montessori or similar materials to a classroom of children — and the presentation of the materials is a very important aspect of Montessori education.

I structured my first teaching years in second grade by having an early hour and a half my main lesson period, while an afternoon hour was my learning center period. Even in these early years, I experienced the lovely rhythm of alternating a teacher-inspired group lesson with a time for children to individually follow their own inner educational direction. The children really seemed to thrive with these alternating school structures. And I, as the teacher, loved the two roles: the orchestrator of happy group learning and the more behind the scenes resource guide, helping the children channel and express special, individual interests in the classroom.

I also noticed that kids developed different qualities in these two structures. With group work I was able to help the kids work on specific skills and to feel mastery with a prescribed curriculum. With individualized work the children developed a real feeling of confidence that they could do it all by themselves.

My interest in blending Montessori and Waldorf was soon to take a much more structured and concrete turn. In 1977 I was asked to help start a private school, The White Pony School, run by a small American Sufi Order reoriented by Meher Baba. Our teacher, Murshida Ivy Duce, was familiar with both Montessori and Waldorf, so she organized her fledgling school as a blend of both methods. I was hired to bring in the Waldorf philosophy and two trained Montessori teachers worked from their angle. In our first year my Montessori partner and I had a second and third grade class. Each classroom at the White Pony, by the way, was run by female and male

teachers working together. This was another White Pony innovation.

We would open with a Waldorf “morning circle” of movement exercises, poems, songs, and rhythmic math practice. Then I would take one grade for the Waldorf “Main Lesson,” while Adele took the other group for Montessori activities. Later in the morning we would switch groups.

At the White Pony School I apprenticed with my Montessori partner and finally learned how to introduce, present, and use the wonderful Montessori equipment designed for elementary children. I was reinforced in my early intuition that blending these two great educational approaches was the way I wanted to teach. It was not only right for the children, but right for me.

My tenure at the White Pony was followed by four years at an accredited Montessori school. The primary lesson I learned from four years at the Montessori school was the danger, as I saw it, of too much individual work. I noticed that children who had experienced only the Montessori Method from preschool to fourth or fifth grade were so conditioned to work independently and follow their own educational interests that they seemed bored and resentful if I tried to teach a group lesson. It was as if they said, “How dare you try to teach me something! I can do it all by myself.” These long time Montessori kids seemed to develop an exaggerated ego that made them overly self-reliant.

When I got a new job in 1989 at a small, rural public school, teaching kindergarten and first grade, I was determined to go back to my White Pony techniques and combine Waldorf-inspired group work with individual work in learning centers. As luck would have it, a Montessori teacher had been the administrator of the school earlier and she had purchased thousands of dollars of good Montessori materials for the primary grades. These materials had been stored in a big closet for several years, because none of the current faculty had any idea of how to use them. In my new class I was able to set up learning centers which included many Montessori materials, in addition to games and puzzles I had acquired through the years.

One interesting difference between the Montessori equipment and my own homemade or store

bought games and learning supplies was that my materials were open-ended and the Montessori work was always focused on a single, particular academic skill. In other words, with Montessori there was a specific way to use each piece of equipment, with the goal that the child would learn a specific math or language skill. To fully use my open-ended, creative materials I developed what I called the Imagination Center. This was an area in the class in which the children could build forts, castles out of blocks, dress up in costumes and put on puppet shows. I never felt like I had to be a strict Montessori teacher, but my Montessori background was very helpful.

Finally I was able to bring back my beloved Waldorf lessons. I would teach reading and phonics by first telling the students a fairy tale, which we later illustrated with a drawing done with beeswax crayons. From the drawing I would pull out an image which would suggest the shape of a letter—like M for mountains, or V for valley. I would develop the phonics lesson over the next few days with the backdrop of the week’s fairy tale.

After working on such Waldorf-type lessons for an hour and a half, our outdoor recess would be followed by a Learning Center period.

Individual learning would come through social interactions and through doing activities with the hands. Dr. Montessori always said that in childhood the hands had a special connection with the brain. What children touch and feel are “hardwired” directly to the brain and learning becomes effectively imprinted, which highlights the importance of choice in activities.

In groupwork the brain is not imprinted in the same way. The picture-making quality of the brain (as Steiner describes it) helps kids imaginatively explore academic skills with lessons in which members of the group join in and stimulate each other under the guidance of the teacher. A group dynamic is created which is both fun and stimulating. The mind is directly accessed through the imagination, not through the hands.

Many things were accomplished during my Waldorf-inspired lessons. I was able to systematically teach the benchmark skills — such as long or short vowels or the use of a question mark — and make

sure all the kids learned the skills. I was also able to hone listening and speaking benchmarks by telling and retelling the great folktales from many cultures, often with poems and songs to be memorized. Finally, I was able to give the kids specific artistic training with group artwork that accompanied each week's story.

During the Montessori period children reviewed and sharpened skills they had learned in the main lesson, as they learned new skills in math, language arts, and geography. Many children enjoy pursuing what are called in Montessori elementary classes "studies." Here kids research generally a science topic from library books and internet resources, and end up with a written and illustrated report they've created. Thus they have a nice introduction to writing a research paper, plus extra work to proudly take home to their parents.

The real goal of the activity period is to allow the children time to follow their own inner educational impulses and, as Sri Aurobindo (n.d., 17) would say, "utilize their inner potential in free progress." The children value and love this free time, and I love watching and orchestrating 21 human minds pursuing knowledge in 21 different directions. I asked one child last week why he liked activity period so much, and he replied, "In center period nobody tells me what to do."

The children, the parents, and I were very happy with this varied structure and the children were successfully able to learn, and even to continually raise standardized test scores.

These two modes of learning — learning in a group setting and following one's own self-chosen impulses — are both valid and complementary modes of learning for all of us. One has to ask, how is it that these two great educational impulses, arising from the philosophies of two educational giants, can be so different? And how is it that both approaches are touted as universally applicable answers to all educational questions?

One response is obvious: If you're trained to be a Steiner or Montessori teacher and you work in a school called a Waldorf or a Montessori school, you are required to represent that system. It certainly wouldn't do for a Waldorf teacher to tell parents how brilliant Maria Montessori was!

One colleague of mine at the White Pony School had a wise insight into how these two educational systems developed so differently. Monika Kocho-wiec, trained as a Waldorf teacher in Bern, Switzerland, told me:

Rudolf Steiner came out of the intellectual and stiff Germanic culture. So, his educational ideal balanced that background. Rather than emphasize that stiff, disciplined and intellectually strict impulse, the Waldorf schools are full of storytelling, art, imagination, knitting and flowing eurythmy movements.

Montessori, on the other hand, developed her ideas with poor Italian families. The open, flowing, emotional and less intellectual Italian temperament was balanced with a method that is very disciplined, sequential and even intellectual in its approach. Every piece of equipment has a correct way to be used and a single, strict intellectual outcome which arises out of its correct use.

No flowing, artistic work here!

Looking at the whole issue this way — through history, culture and national temperament — one can appreciate why the two approaches are different. But it is also clear that these two can easily complement each other and benefit from the others' strengths, for what Waldorf provides, Montessori needs; and what Montessori provides, Waldorf needs. They complement each other.

One renown educator that has understood and agreed with this premise is Dee Joy Coulter. She calls Montessori and Steiner "a pattern of reverse symmetries." Coulter is a neuroscience educator, holding a doctorate in neurological studies and holistic education from the University of Northern Colorado. She, like myself, has been a friend of both the Waldorf and Montessori movements for years. Coulter does not so much speak of how teachers should (or could) combine Waldorf and Montessori in the same classroom; she suggests instead that Waldorf and Montessori teachers could enrich their understanding of children by studying each other's philosophies.

Coulter (1991, 32) also points out masculine and feminine traits in these educational movements:

Montessori [the masculine impulse] spoke more of materials, environment, structure, building, play exercise, concepts, specificity, order and practicality...[whereas] Waldorf [the feminine impulse] spoke of delicate processes, essence, aspects, rhythm, feeling elements, context, imagination and beauty.

Maybe this almost Jungian concept of blending the feminine with the masculine, the inner with the outer, is why I've been obsessed for forty years with combining Waldorf and Montessori in my classroom. For an adult, the spiritual path, the psychological process of individuation, self-actualization or the Buddhist journey toward enlightenment, is nothing but *religio*, literally reuniting different inner and outer aspects of one's own being. Maybe that's what education should be for children: helping them learn about the world around them through touching their inner, subjective beings, as well as leading them to interact with a rich environment. In other words, maybe what children really need is a creative, nurturing, enlivening blend of Waldorf and Montessori.

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