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Recommended Citation

Oak, Garry H., "Leaving Kindergarten Well: First-grade Readiness in Outdoor Waldorf Kindergartens" (2023). *Leadership for Sustainability Education Comprehensive Papers*. 17.
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/lse_comp/17

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**Leaving Kindergarten Well:
First-grade Readiness in Outdoor Waldorf Kindergartens**

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Educational Leadership and Policy
Leadership for Sustainability Education
Comprehensive Exam
Summer 2023

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Introduction

“We have to let the being of the child speak to our sensing of his or her readiness and destiny. If we are guided by sustained, warm interest in the child, we will be guided well.”

-Nancy Blanning

Brief Overview of Waldorf Education

To provide some context, Waldorf education originated in Germany during World War I in response to two major needs. The first was to provide a nurturing and secure learning environment for children as industrialization and capitalism led to both parents working outside the home. The second was to develop an educational approach that would raise children to become adults who could not engage in the violence and destruction of war. Waldorf schools are sometimes perceived as preserving traditional practices that prioritize aesthetics and delay abstract thinking until after age nine, a belief based on the idea that children are not developmentally prepared for explicit learning until this age (Steiner, 1996c). Waldorf teachers teach topics in a developmentally appropriate way, when they are most relevant and engaging for the child (Patzlaff, 2014b). They believe that young children cannot access abstract content in a holistic way, which deems abstract teaching as an issue of accessibility.

Background Info on Waldorf Early Childhood Education

During the time when Waldorf education was first established, the common cultural belief was that children shouldn't start school until the age of seven, and that they should stay home with their parents for healthy development. This is why Waldorf kindergartens and

preschools often have a homely feel and focus on domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and mending. The original purpose of the first Waldorf kindergarten was to prepare children for first grade. This kindergarten class ran from April through August and was solely focused on preparing dreamy young children for the formal learning that awaited them in first grade. The first Waldorf Kindergarten teacher, Elisabeth Grunelius advised that we need to remember that class teachers teach, but the kindergarten teacher must show what should be done through their life and being (Howard, 2005).

In Waldorf kindergartens, storytelling is a fundamental part of language development and literacy building. Children are exposed to a variety of stories from different cultures, including folk and fairy tales, that not only entertain but also teach important values and lessons. Through listening to these stories, children develop their vocabulary, imagination, and creativity. In addition to storytelling, Waldorf teachers are mindful of their own speech patterns and how they communicate with children. They avoid using slang, sarcasm, or other forms of language that may confuse or undermine the child's understanding of proper speech. According to Steiner, before the change of teeth, around the age of seven, children are primarily focused on the sensory experience of the world and need a strong foundation in concrete, practical activities and experiences before they are ready for more abstract thinking (Steiner, 1995). Additionally Steiner says that children, prior to age seven, learn primarily through imitation, making it particularly beneficial to model proper language usage during this time (Steiner, 1991). By modeling appropriate language and clear communication, teachers help children develop their listening and communication skills, which are essential for literacy and overall social development.

In Waldorf kindergartens, children are encouraged to express themselves through different forms of art and play, such as drawing, painting, sculpting, and singing, which not only

promote creativity but also develop fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination, important for writing and other academic skills. Additionally, Patzlaff (2014b) notes that Waldorf kindergartens provide a nurturing and stimulating environment for children to learn and grow, and children are given the foundation they need for successful literacy and math learning in the future through storytelling, modeling proper speech, and various forms of art and play. Furthermore, these activities are also important for the development of children in Waldorf early childhood education, as they provide opportunities for children to explore and learn through play.

While it's possible for young children to learn abstract thinking, Waldorf educators believe it's unnecessary for their developmental needs. This view, of course, is very different from the mainstream education culture or “schoolification” of Kindergarten, which emphasizes early academic instruction (Patzlaff, 2014a). Early academic pressure can lead to negative consequences for young children's physical and emotional development. For example, a study by Duncan et al. (2007) found that students who started formal academic instruction at an early age, between four to five, had more behavior problems and poorer social skills compared to children who started formal schooling at age six or later. Additionally it was found that preschool academic intervention did not create substantial achievement later on (Duncan et al., 2007). Academic pressure in Kindergarten can produce higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of motivation and engagement in school. Moreover a lack of play can also contribute to these problems and cause developmental delays (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). As play is a vital aspect of childhood, Waldorf schools prioritize providing opportunities for children to engage in imaginative play. The significance of play in childhood development is well-established in research, and its absence can impede healthy human development (Ginsburg, 2007). While Waldorf education's approach to early childhood education may differ from mainstream

practices, research supports the importance of play and age-appropriate stimulation for healthy human development, and highlights the potential negative consequences of academic pressure at a young age.

Purpose

The transition from Kindergarten to first grade is a crucial milestone in a child's educational journey. Research has demonstrated that children who are better prepared for this transition have a higher likelihood of succeeding academically later on (Blair & Raver, 2012). First-grade readiness encompasses a variety of cognitive, social, and emotional abilities that are vital for success in the classroom. These skills range from executive functioning, attention, self-regulation, and social-emotional development (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Children who possess these skills when they start first grade are more likely to manage the academic demands of the classroom and lay a solid foundation for future learning. However, many children face obstacles in achieving first-grade readiness, which could result in lower academic achievement and an increased risk of academic failure (Blair & Raver, 2012). Therefore, identifying the factors that contribute to first-grade readiness is critical for promoting positive outcomes in children's educational and social-emotional development. Given the significance of early childhood education and the increasing interest in outdoor education, identifying the factors that contribute to first-grade readiness becomes even more critical for promoting positive outcomes in children's educational and social-emotional development.

Early childhood education is a critical phase of human development, as it lays the foundation for a child's future growth and learning. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in outdoor education as a means of promoting holistic development among young children. In this regard, Waldorf early childhood education has emerged as a unique approach

that emphasizes the importance of outdoor learning and physical activity, along with nurturing a child's sense of autonomy. This paper aims to explore the benefits of Outdoor Waldorf early childhood education in preparing children for first grade, particularly in terms of their physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development. This is why I believe that outdoor Waldorf early childhood education can prepare children holistically for first grade by developing their autonomy and physical bodies, while also meeting assessment standards for learning readiness..

The Importance of Place-based Outdoor Education

“Receive the children with reverence, educate them in love, send them forth in freedom.”

– Rudolf Steiner

Benefits of Outdoor Education for Children

To determine the advantages of a given educational approach, it is crucial to examine its objectives. Outdoor education seeks to foster children's innate curiosity and appreciation for the world, promoting their spiritual growth, imagination, and quest for truth. By aiming to cultivate ecological humans rather than mechanical ones, outdoor educators are challenging the prevailing paradigm.

Young children have the potential to form an emotional bond with the natural world, which can positively impact their attitudes and actions towards the environment (Sobel, 1999a). This bond can initiate environmental citizenship and cultivate a sense of connection to the natural world. However, children today often lack access to appropriate outdoor spaces where they can engage in self-initiated and imaginative play, problem-solving, and physical activity, which can promote empathy, appreciation for nature, creativity, and physical strength. This lack of access to nature has led to a new phenomenon in childhood called "nature-deficit disorder," as described by Louv (2008), who advocates for a renewed emphasis on connecting children with the natural world for their health and the health of the planet.

The current state of modern children's relationship with the outdoors raises important questions about how educators should approach outdoor education. As children today spend less time outdoors, it is critical for educators to consider what teaching approach is needed to facilitate meaningful outdoor experiences. To successfully connect children with nature, educators will need to be flexible and adaptable in their approach to teaching. While many educators believe that outdoor play provides greater opportunities for exploration, creativity, and socialization compared to indoor play, indoor play can also offer a safe and comfortable environment for children to engage in imaginative and creative play, especially during inclement weather.

Comparison of Indoor and Outdoor Learning Environments

Indoor and outdoor learning environments offer different opportunities and challenges to early childhood education. In an indoor setting, students are usually exposed to structured and controlled learning activities, while an outdoor setting provides opportunities for exploration, hands-on experiences, and discovery. According to Bodrova and Leong (2012), indoor learning environments are primarily designed to teach academic skills such as literacy and numeracy, while outdoor environments focus on developing children's social, emotional, and physical skills. In addition, outdoor environments promote sensory experiences and engage children in natural play, which are vital to their cognitive development (Sobel et al., 2015). Incorporating both indoor and outdoor environments in early childhood education can create a well-rounded and holistic approach that fosters the development of the whole child.

Whether indoor or outdoor nature-based play has advantages for children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development in both settings. The reality is that educators face different challenges when implementing nature-based play in each environment. Similarly,

Kindergarten teachers today struggle to incorporate nature-based play into their curriculum as they prioritize preparing children for first grade. Additionally modern children often lack opportunities for physical work or socializing in large groups. As such, while balancing academic preparation and holistic development through nature-based play may be a challenge, it was interesting to note the similarities and differences in teaching methods during my observation of Shining Star's Indoor Kindergarten, Linden Tree, particularly with regards to the level of physical activity. The children in the indoor Kindergarten spent a portion of their day outdoors in a play yard that allowed for ample space and opportunities to engage in complex physical activities. Conversely, the children in my outdoor classroom, at Shining Star, were constantly on the move, climbing, running, jumping, crawling, and engaging in more complex and purposeful physical activities. This difference in physical activity levels may be attributed to the different environments in which each classroom is located, as the indoor Kindergarten was located in a busy urban area with limited outdoor space, while my outdoor classroom had access to a large outdoor nature area with various natural elements and obstacles to engage with.

Outdoor learning environments can enhance children's cognitive development and promote creativity. Additionally, outdoor settings provide opportunities for students to interact with nature and learn about the environment, which is vital in developing their appreciation for nature (Alvarez & Rogers, 2006). Waldorf Forest Kindergartens are an example of a program that emphasizes outdoor learning and uses nature as a classroom to promote children's holistic development. On the other hand, indoor environments provide a structured and safe environment where students can focus on activities without distractions (Kessler, 2000). This is not to say that guided activities cannot happen outdoors but rather that there are fewer distractions in a controlled indoor environment.

It is true that both indoor and outdoor environments have their limitations. In an indoor environment, children may have limited opportunities for hands-on experiences and exploration (Bodrova & Leong, 2012). Additionally, an indoor environment may not provide opportunities for children to develop their physical skills and engage in physical play, which is vital for their overall development (Blair & Raver, 2012). On the other hand, outdoor environments may pose risks to children's safety, such as exposure to extreme weather conditions and dangerous wildlife (Hallowell, 2002). This is why both indoor and outdoor learning environments offer unique opportunities and challenges to early childhood education, with indoor settings often providing a structured and safe environment for learning and outdoor settings providing opportunities for exploration, hands-on experiences, and sensory engagement that are vital to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Benefits of Place-based Education

When children are outdoors in environments that are filled with biological diversity, they are able to enter deep-play which allows them to access a powerful sense of belonging to the natural world around them (Sobel, 2017c). According to Sobel (2004b), play is the primary activity of children, and it can foster a strong connection between children and the people and places that facilitate their play. In this context, place-based education, as described by Sobel (2004), seeks to connect students with their local environment, culture, history, and community. Similarly, Louv (2008) urges individuals, families, businesses, and political leaders to recognize the transformative power of nature, especially in today's technology-driven world, and to strike a balance between virtual experiences and real-life connections with the natural world. In the future, those who are "nature-smart" and understand the importance of connecting with the natural world will be better equipped to navigate the challenges of our rapidly changing world.

This is because there is an infinite amount of learning that can occur from the natural world. Smith (2007) recommends that community and environment should be the starting point for teaching across all curriculum, with the goal of engaging students and increasing academic achievement. This more formal approach to teaching is something that comes after children have experienced the natural world on a deep level. When children love a place, they are more likely to take care of it, and this is the basis for place-based learning. (Sobel, 2004b; Smith, 2002; Louv, 2007).

Criticism of Outdoor Education

Outdoor education can be associated with certain concerns, such as safety, overstimulation, and limited learning outcomes. Safety concerns can arise due to factors like weather conditions and inadequate supervision. However, even controlled environments cannot completely eliminate such risks. One way to manage these risks is by ensuring that educators provide appropriate supervision and carefully select safe sites for activities. For instance, Sobel et al., (2015) offer practical advice on how to design nature-based programs for young children that consider safety and risk management. Outdoor programs typically have extreme weather policies in place to move activities indoors or cancel them if necessary. It's also important to note that a lack of supervision increases the risks associated with any program, regardless of whether it's conducted indoors or outdoors. Experienced educators can determine the number of children they can safely supervise on a given site and should be consulted prior to starting any educational program.

With these concerns in mind and the possibility of designing appropriate nature programs, we need to be mindful of not creating excessively controlled outdoor environments for children, as freedom and autonomy are essential for their healthy development. Little and Wyver

(2008) highlight the advantages of outdoor play for young children and suggest that excessively cautious approaches can hinder children's chances for exploration and learning, as well as limit their sense of agency. Programs need to strike a balance between safety and exploration to foster children's autonomy in their outdoor experiences. Our goal should be to provide children with diverse outdoor environments that promote their development and learning through play behaviors influenced by biologically varied surroundings. While ensuring safety is crucial, providing children with diverse and biologically varied outdoor environments that allow for exploration and play is essential for promoting their development, learning, and autonomy.

Another concern for outdoor programs is the potential for overstimulation of children. It is important to create natural play environments that provide a range of sensory experiences and opportunities for both active and quiet play to support children's development and well-being, without overwhelming them (Lester, 2007). In order to balance outdoor activities with rest and quiet time, Charles and Louv (2008) suggest that outdoor programs should include time for unstructured play and exploration, as well as quiet reflection and observation, which can teach young children how to regulate themselves. Without this balance, children may struggle to transition indoors because they have not been taught how to regulate themselves. A symbiosis between introspection and extroversion can be created through careful program design. There is practical guidance for designing outdoor play spaces that are safe, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate for young children, and Sobel et al., (2015) provide practical guidance for creating nature-based programs for young children, including safety considerations and strategies for managing risk. With proper education, outdoor teachers can structure their programs to ensure that children are more prepared to transition indoors for grade school. By addressing safety concerns, providing a balanced learning environment, and supporting

children's development, outdoor education programs can offer unique and valuable learning opportunities for young children.

Cultural Consciousness

"Diversity is not a problem to be solved, but an opportunity to be embraced."

-Verna Myers

Healing Childhood

The current societal pressures and education system are harming the holistic development of children by emphasizing academic achievement and premature adulthood, and to heal childhood we need to prioritize creativity, play, as well as emotional and spiritual development. Payne and Ross(2010) argue that modern society places too much pressure on children to grow up too quickly, leading to issues such as anxiety, over-stimulation, and lack of imagination. To heal childhood, they suggest that parents make changes in the family life to better support their growing and developing children. Similarly, Rachael Kessler (2000) examines issues in modern education that have led to a disconnection between students and their inner lives, such as the pressure of standardized testing, academic achievement-focused curriculum, and lack of attention to emotional, social, and spiritual development. To address these challenges, she advocates for a focus on the whole child. Hallowell (2002) also addresses the importance of childhood play, creativity, and exploration, which can lead to greater curiosity, imagination, and innovation in adulthood. All these authors suggest that to heal childhood, we need to rethink societal pressures, emphasize the holistic development of children, and promote creativity, exploration, and play.

Payne and Ross (2010) suggests that Waldorf education is an effective approach to support healthy childhood development and well-being. Waldorf education emphasizes rhythm and routine, limits exposure to technology, and fosters imaginative play, which can all contribute to a nurturing environment. Payne and Ross's approach aligns with Louv's (2008) call for a

rethinking of modern society's relationship with nature, which advocates for integrating nature into daily life and education. By connecting children with the natural world on a daily basis and providing them with a nurturing environment, we may be able to promote healthy childhood development and well-being, as well as a deeper connection to the environment. Thus, Waldorf education and the integration of nature into daily life and education offer a promising solution to the challenges facing modern childhood.

Accessibility

Waldorf education is a holistic approach that emphasizes the development of the whole child. However, the high cost of Waldorf education and lack of inclusivity have made it inaccessible to many families. There are many issues of accessibility and affordability of Waldorf education, specifically that the high cost of tuition can be a significant barrier for families. This financial barrier can limit the number of families who can access this approach to education, making it accessible primarily to affluent families. Additionally the lack of public awareness and public funding contributes to the high cost of Waldorf education. However, addressing financial accessibility is not the only form of access that needs to be considered. Inclusivity is another critical aspect that needs to be addressed in the Waldorf community. There are practical strategies for making Waldorf education more inclusive for students with diverse backgrounds and abilities, including creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment. Furthermore, it is also important to create a more diverse and inclusive Waldorf education community and advocate for more training for teachers and administrators.

The issue of racial inclusivity is particularly important in the context of Waldorf education due to its historical lack of diversity. There are many ways in which Waldorf schools can work to create a more inclusive and diverse community, including diversifying faculty and

staff and actively engaging with issues of social justice. To create a more racially inclusive and diverse community, Waldorf schools could also consider creating a more inclusive curriculum that represents a diversity of cultures, experiences, and perspectives. More broadly, if we are to make true progress in diversity and inclusion it involves a fundamental shift in the way individuals think and feel, as well as aiming to create lasting change at the core of people's values and understanding (Mir, 2022). This is not to say that practical tools are not important to change people's values. For example, Waldorf schools could actively recruit and support families from diverse backgrounds to ensure that a variety of experiences and perspectives are represented within the school community. This approach would help shift the core values and principles within the community as a whole. Additionally it might be wise to pair Waldorf education with another proven teaching approach to create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. A good example of a teaching approach that would compliment Waldorf Education well would be culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy can play an important role in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment, particularly in Waldorf education where racial inclusivity and diversity have historically been lacking. By incorporating culturally relevant materials and activities into the curriculum and building strong relationships with families and communities Waldorf schools will become accessible to families from differing cultural backgrounds. In addition, celebrating diversity in the classroom through multicultural literature, music, and art will aid the goal of increasing school access. To implement culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers can provide opportunities for students to share their cultural traditions and practices, and to learn about the cultures of their classmates. This can be done through classroom discussions,

sharing cultural rituals, inviting guest speakers from the community, and incorporating diverse perspectives and histories into the curriculum. This is particularly important for first grade readiness in Waldorf education, where teachers work to create a nurturing and holistic learning environment that emphasizes imaginative play, rhythm, and routine. By embracing culturally responsive practices, teachers can create a classroom culture that values and honors the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all students, setting the foundation for a successful first-grade experience.

Critical Pedagogy of Place

Critical pedagogy of place emphasizes the importance of local knowledge, culture, and environment in education, and can be particularly relevant in the context of first grade Waldorf readiness. Waldorf educators can incorporate this approach by engaging children in authentic and meaningful learning experiences that take place in the local context, such as community-based projects, outdoor exploration, and cultural activities. The natural world can provide an ideal setting for these experiences, as long as educators are aware of the complexity of nature play and the potential for critical inquiry. By incorporating critical pedagogy of place into first grade Waldorf readiness, educators can create a more meaningful and culturally relevant learning experience for students.

Remedial Education

In Waldorf education, remedial education is a personalized and developmentally appropriate approach to address a child's specific learning difficulties or delays. This approach emphasizes the role of the teacher in observing and identifying areas of difficulty in children and working with parents to develop appropriate remedial plans. Remedial education in Waldorf early childhood is a personalized and developmentally appropriate approach to address a child's

specific learning difficulties or delays. The teacher's role in observing and identifying areas of difficulty in children and working with parents to develop appropriate remedial plans are of high importance in creating early intervention. Additionally, teachers can create opportunities for cooperative play and learning, storytelling, and other imaginative activities to encourage empathy and create a strong sense of community among children and families. Integrating Waldorf-inspired strategies, such as sensory integration activities and addressing developmental delays, can enhance the learning experience for all children in the classroom, not just those who may be struggling. In a Waldorf classroom, teachers can use these strategies to support children's diverse needs and create an inclusive learning environment where all children feel supported and valued.

Integrating remedial education into the Waldorf teacher training curriculum is essential for teachers to quickly identify and address any learning difficulties or delays in their students, and to create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment for all children. However, the current methods of remedial education in Waldorf are primarily focused on indoor programs, which may not be optimal for children who feel more comfortable and engaged in outdoor settings. Some children become irritable and even aggressive indoors and are often better served to play and find social balance in the outdoors (Bennett & Borden, 2005). To address this issue, it may be necessary to develop and implement outdoor-based remedial education programs that are aligned with Waldorf principles and pedagogy. By doing so, teachers can provide high-needs children with more opportunities for meaningful and authentic learning experiences that take place in nature, which can enhance their overall well-being. Additionally, incorporating outdoor remedial education into the first grade Waldorf readiness program can support children's

development of key skills, such as sensory integration and social-emotional regulation, while also fostering a deeper connection to nature and the local environment.

First-Grade Readiness

“Ecological systems thrive on feedback, whether it is positive or negative, because feedback is how they learn and adapt.”

-Donella Meadows

Overview of Waldorf First-grade Readiness

In order to prepare children for first grade while meeting their needs, we need to assess both ourselves and the children. Waldorf education uses Anthroposophy to guide its teaching approach, which emphasizes the spiritual nature of human beings and seeks to understand the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. According to Anthroposophy, the human being is three-fold, consisting of three forces: thinking, feeling, and willing. These forces are connected to first grade readiness through three fundamental categories for readiness: learning readiness (thinking), school readiness (willing), and class readiness (feeling) (Schoorel, 2014).

When assessing learning readiness, we must observe if the child has developed enough maturity of thought to begin explicit learning. This can manifest in different ways, such as an increased interest in the details of the world, the development of new language skills and sounds, and a more complex memory. When assessing school readiness, we look for a child's sense of autonomy, as they shift towards a new stage of engagement with the outer world. We observe if the child is independent and responsible enough to meet the requirements of first grade, as well as if they show restraint and understand the importance of things flowing smoothly. When assessing class readiness, we look at the child's emotional development, including their ability to ask for help, deal with being reprimanded, put the needs of the group above their own, show gratitude, and desire to work. Physical readiness is also important, including whether the child

feels at home in their body, their limbs are long enough, and they are agile in their movements. It is important to remember that assessments involve intuitive understanding of the child's development, not only checking boxes (Blanning, 2016). I find the description by O'Neil as quoted by Brown (2017) that the process is mycelial, with the beginning and end in the same place, and an emphasis on the narrative in-between, to be accurate in providing a metaphorical experience to the assessment process for first grade readiness.

The Importance of Early Childhood Education in Preparing Children for First Grade

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in preparing children for success in first grade. Research has shown that children who receive high-quality early childhood education are more likely to have better academic outcomes and social-emotional development (Barnett, 2011). Thus, providing children with opportunities to learn and develop in outdoor environments, such as forest schools or outdoor classrooms, can enhance their overall readiness for first grade and beyond.

Providing children with outdoor learning opportunities can also be a valuable component in the decision-making process regarding a child's readiness for first grade. After an assessment, three options are available: another year of Kindergarten, move to first grade with additional therapeutic support, or continue without support (Blanning, 2016). Typically, if a child is assessed and allowed to rise into first grade, they will need to be assessed again to ensure readiness for second grade. However, it is important to consider whether the indoor classroom is enough to support children in becoming ready for first grade. Increasingly, Waldorf early childhood educators are taking their classrooms outdoors, either formally as forest schools or by spending more time outside. Schools are also recognizing the importance of outdoor time for children, even in urban environments, but may not fully understand the potential benefits for

child development. This is why incorporating outdoor learning opportunities can be a crucial factor in determining a child's readiness for first grade, and schools should consider the benefits of outdoor time for child development.

How Waldorf Education Prepares Children for First Grade

In Waldorf early childhood education, children are prepared for first grade by being placed in an ideal environment that allows them to grow at their own pace. Waldorf education provides a play-based learning environment that fosters creativity and imagination. Additionally Waldorf teachers also prioritize building strong relationships with their students to help children feel comfortable and confident in the classroom. In this way, Waldorf Kindergartens can feel more like an extension of home rather than a formal school. If a child needs additional support to be ready for first grade, the teacher will use the child's own imagination to help them without the child even realizing that extra support is being given. The nature-based curriculum of Waldorf education can also help children develop a sense of connection with the natural world, which can lead to better mental and emotional well-being. Overall, the unique and holistic approach of Waldorf education can help children develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Comparison of Waldorf Education to Traditional Education in Terms of First-grade Readiness

The idea of school readiness has been debated among policy makers, as it is not a one-size-fits-all assessment and can be unsound. As Patzlaff (2014a) notes, there is a dominant narrative in education that treats children as a product to be pushed through academic rigor on a conveyor belt. In contrast, first-grade readiness is focused on the individual child and their unique level of preparedness. Traditional assessments often neglect the social-emotional and physical development of the child, providing an incomplete picture of their readiness for first

grade. Waldorf education takes a holistic approach, emphasizing the individual needs of each child and their readiness for academic and social-emotional growth. As Steiner believed, the child is the book of teaching, and it is the teacher's role to read and understand the child's developmental needs. This approach can help educators and parents place children in appropriate learning environments that are best suited to their level of development. In contrast, conventional education approaches often use a child's birthdate as the sole determinant for first grade readiness.

Many parents feel guilty if their children do not move on to first grade with their peers, as society often equates success with early academic achievement. This pressure can cause parents to enroll their children in programs that prioritize academic rigor over the child's holistic development, potentially leading to an inadequate learning environment. However, parents should focus on their child's individual readiness for academic and social-emotional growth rather than conforming to societal expectations. By taking a more individualized approach, parents can find learning environments that are better suited to their child's needs and promote their overall development. Waldorf education also differs from traditional education in its approach to learning. In Waldorf education, the focus is not solely on academics but also on developing the whole child, including their social-emotional, physical, and artistic development. This approach suggests a holistic approach to education can lead to better academic outcomes.

In contrast, traditional education often places a heavy emphasis on standardized testing and rote memorization, which can limit creativity and critical thinking skills. This can be particularly challenging for young children who may not yet have fully developed cognitive abilities. By fostering creativity and imagination through nature-based learning and artistic expression, Waldorf education can help children develop the critical thinking skills they need to

succeed in academic environments while also promoting a love for learning that can last a lifetime.

The Solution - Waldorf Outdoor Education in Practice

"The healthy social life is found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the community the virtue of each one is living."

- Rudolf Steiner

Examples of Outdoor Waldorf Early Childhood Classrooms

Currently, I work as the lead teacher at Shining Star Waldorf School's Forest Kindergarten. Shining Star has always recognized the significance of outdoor education. In 2007, Shining Star became the first Waldorf School in the United States to establish a fully outdoor Waldorf forest kindergarten. Although the forest kindergarten program eventually became a separate school, called Mother Earth School, Shining Star still offers a completely outdoor forest kindergarten, as well as a Nature Immersion Program for first through eighth graders every Friday. During this program, students visit various natural areas around the Portland area, while attending classes indoors from Monday to Thursday. As a teacher in the Osoberry Forest Kindergarten class, I have observed that the readiness level of children who transition from my class to first grade differs from those who were in the indoor kindergarten. I have also observed from other schools that such readiness levels can vary from class to class, even between different indoor kindergartens. Given this scenario, I believe that the solution may be to move more towards outdoor education, especially with the emergence of this new age of childhood. With these experiences in mind, outdoor education may be a solution for improving readiness levels of children transitioning from kindergarten to first grade.

I am deeply curious about the potential of outdoor early childhood education within a Waldorf context to create a more uniform readiness for children entering first grade. I believe

that this could benefit not only the individual child but also create a group of children who are ready to move on together to the next stage of their education. To explore this idea, I have observed several outdoor programs, including a completely outdoor Forest Kindergarten at the Whidbey Island Waldorf School, Seattle Waldorf School's Rosemary class, which spends all day outdoors, and The Eastside Community School's The Golden Eagle Program, a Friday forest day for rising first graders only. Through these observations, I have seen that outdoor programs have the same capacity as indoor classrooms, but offer more natural opportunities for children to engage in diverse and complex movements, develop motor skills, and connect more deeply with their surroundings.

During my observation of the Forest Kindergarten at Whidbey Island Waldorf School, I witnessed the children engaging in various physical activities such as climbing, obstacle courses, and long hikes with backpacks. Unlike traditional Waldorf classrooms, there were few teacher-led activities, creating a more relaxed and comfortable learning environment. The children had story time during snack time, which is unconventional but allowed for more time outdoors and less time sitting still during the coldest months of the year. I observed that outdoor teachers adapt the traditional Waldorf indoor classroom approach by discovering the essence of each activity. In this class, the children were developing their physical abilities through hiking and play, while circle time and story time helped develop their learning faculties. Additionally the children had a daily rotating task of leading the hike, which promoted autonomy, responsibility, and school readiness. They were responsible for carrying their own gear, including snacks, clothes, and even a carving knife—something that rising first graders crave.

Another program that I observed was The Eastside Community School's Golden Eagle Program, which is a one-day-per-week outdoor program specifically designed to prepare and

unify rising first graders for their transition to first grade. The program is held all outdoors in the forest and is mandatory for all rising first graders. The school created this program in response to the observation that children were entering first grade with varying levels of readiness depending on the indoor kindergarten they attended. The school found that by having all the children participate in outdoor activities like balancing, crossing the midline, crawling, climbing, hiking, jumping, and running, they could more easily bring them to first grade readiness. This was especially effective because all the children in the program were the same age, as opposed to the school's mixed-age kindergarten classes.

My experience as a lead teacher in a fully outdoor forest kindergarten program has shown that children who have experienced outdoor education may have a different readiness level for first grade compared to those who have not. This observation highlights the potential benefits of outdoor education in preparing children for their academic journey, and suggests that more schools should consider implementing outdoor education programs to support the holistic development of children.

Indoor Classrooms that Increase Time Spent Outdoors

This year, I had the opportunity to complete my practicum in the Rosemary class at Seattle Waldorf School, and I found it to be the best example of an indoor Waldorf kindergarten transitioning to an outdoor environment. The class had originally been an indoor kindergarten, but over time, they started to spend more time at a public park across the street. Now, they spend the entire day outdoors in the park, except for a brief morning activity and rest time after lunch, which is when they go inside. The lead teacher, who has over thirty-five years of experience in this classroom, shifted the class outdoors because he observed that children today have a better experience at school when they spend more time in nature.

Many Waldorf indoor teachers have observed that today's children have different needs and preferences than those of the past, and as a result, they are looking for ways to adapt to these changes. With the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers were forced to move out of their classrooms, and now more and more teachers are choosing to maintain an increased amount of time spent outdoors. This reflects a growing awareness of the benefits of nature education for children, and a recognition that it can help meet the changing needs of today's students.

There are various options for environmental education, ranging from taking indoor classes outdoors to forest programs, and hybrid programs. The focus of this discussion is on preparing children for the transformative experience of learning in the grades, and ensuring that this process is not forced prematurely, potentially causing trauma. As a Waldorf early childhood teacher, I completed a specific training program but believe that further training is necessary. Integrating training in remedial education, outdoor teaching competence, and culturally responsive education into teacher training programs is crucial to equip Waldorf early childhood teachers with a comprehensive set of skills. While this research paper does not cover the creation of such content, it is an important area for future research.

Outdoor Education for Teachers

Teacher education is crucial for ensuring that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively implement different teaching approaches. This is particularly important in outdoor education where teachers need to be trained on how to create and manage outdoor learning environments. While the current option for outdoor Waldorf early childhood education is limited to a continuing education course for existing teachers, there is an alternative approach in the form of forest kindergarten.. Instead, the forest kindergarten emphasizes the value of experiential learning, exploration, and unstructured play in a natural environment. There

should be an emphasis on the significance of having qualified and well-trained teachers in implementing the Waldorf approach to outdoor education in forest kindergartens.

Integrating outdoor education into early childhood programs has numerous benefits for children, including improved physical health, social skills, and connections to the natural world. Furthermore, forest kindergartens encourage physical activity and exposure to various weather conditions, leading to overall healthier children. Given these findings, it is imperative that teacher training programs incorporate outdoor teaching approaches for indoor teachers. While some details were provided during my Waldorf teacher training about including nature into the curriculum or classroom, there was limited instruction on how to create a nature-based classroom environment or at least not enough to instill confidence for teachers to begin moving their classrooms outdoors.

Teacher education is crucial for preparing teachers to implement different teaching approaches, including outdoor education. Currently, the only option for outdoor Waldorf early childhood education is an online continuing education course for existing teachers. The forest kindergarten approach offers an alternative to traditional early childhood education, emphasizing experiential learning and unstructured play in a natural environment. Outdoor education has been shown to improve physical health, social skills, and connections to the natural world. Therefore, it is essential for teacher training programs to incorporate outdoor teaching approaches to prepare teachers for creating and managing nature-based classrooms.

Intervention

An effective intervention to address the complex needs of children in outdoor Waldorf kindergartens would involve integrating cultural responsiveness practices, remedial education, and outdoor teacher training competency into existing teacher training programs. This

comprehensive approach would provide new teachers with the necessary tools to meet the diverse needs of their students, and help them to adapt to the evolving challenges of modern education. Ongoing professional development programs could also be established to enable teachers to continuously enhance their skills and knowledge throughout their careers. By adopting a multi-pronged solution that addresses various dimensions of children's development and learning, we can establish a more equitable and effective educational system.

Conclusion

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

- W.B. Yeats

Summary of Key Points

1. Waldorf early childhood education emphasizes a holistic approach that considers the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of a child's development.
2. Outdoor learning can provide unique benefits for young children, including improved physical health, greater autonomy, and increased engagement and motivation.
3. The outdoor environment can also be a valuable learning resource, providing opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving.
4. Waldorf early childhood education in an outdoor setting can help prepare children holistically for first grade by meeting assessment standards for learning readiness and developing their autonomy and physical bodies.
5. The Waldorf approach to education is not without criticisms and limitations, but proponents argue that it offers a valuable alternative to more traditional forms of early childhood education.

Implications for Waldorf Early Childhood Education

Some implications for Waldorf early childhood education are that incorporating outdoor learning and nature-based activities can provide unique benefits for young children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Also emphasizing a holistic approach that considers the whole child can help prepare children for success in later academic and social settings; in addition, encouraging autonomy and self-directed learning can foster children's confidence, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Further, integrating movement and physical activity into the curriculum can support children's overall health and well-being as well as providing a warm and nurturing environment with strong connections to the natural world can foster a sense of belonging and community among children and families.

Implementation of this solution has the potential to create an inclusive school environment where children and families feel like they belong and are represented within the curriculum. Additionally, including remedial education approaches offers teachers more tools for supporting children in their classrooms. This way teachers can intervene quickly with the appropriate actions to prevent internal exclusion and suffering for children. Also if teachers leave teacher training feeling comfortable about taking their classes outdoors the likelihood of them doing so greatly increases, which will allow the children in their class to have increasing exposure to the natural environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

I would recommend future research into the specific ways in which outdoor learning environments impact young children's development, including physical health, cognitive development, and emotional well-being. Additionally, research should continue to explore the effectiveness of Waldorf early childhood education in preparing children for success in later academic and social settings, including longitudinal studies that track children's progress over

time. I would also recommend examining the ways in which autonomy and self-directed learning are developed and fostered in Waldorf early childhood education, and how these skills translate to later academic and social contexts. Also, I would recommend further analysis of the ways in which the Waldorf approach to early childhood education can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse populations, including children with disabilities, children from low-income backgrounds, and children from non-Western cultural contexts.

As mentioned above, given that all of the current methods of remedial education are for indoor programs, a concern is then raised when considering that most high needs children are more comfortable outdoors. So future research is needed about implementing remedial education in outdoor programs. This could be through formal methods of assessment, as well as tools for intervention. Overall, I would like to see how the intersections of culturally responsive education, remedial education, and outdoor education can be integrated into Waldorf teacher training to elevate the knowledge with which teachers begin their careers .

Final Thoughts

Ultimately, the success of Waldorf early childhood education will depend on the ability of educators to adapt the approach to meet the needs of diverse populations and changing societal contexts, while remaining true to its core principles and values. By incorporating the key principles of Waldorf early childhood education, such as outdoor learning, movement, and nurturing autonomy and creativity, educators can create a warm and supportive learning environment that fosters children's development and prepares them for success in later life.

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