

Playing “Steiner Says”: Twenty-two Myths about Waldorf Education

In the September 2017 issue of the English-language online newsletter „Waldorf Today“ an article by Steve Sagarin appeared with this title. Through 22 examples, he indicates how Waldorf educators and parent tend to connect the identity of Waldorf education to specific external traits, habits and behaviors, and to forget the open quality of Rudolf Steiner’s indications as well as his extensive description of the development of the child. The essence of his article could be characterized as follows: let us not lose or harden our identity through outer appearances! Let us focus on the essentials and create ever new appropriate outer forms according to our own situations!

The following excerpts from the article may be of interest to parents and early childhood educators. You can read the original article in its entirety [here](#).

“Understandably, but not necessarily happily, Waldorf education is known primarily by its external characteristics or trappings, characteristics about which, surprisingly often, Rudolf Steiner himself had little or nothing to say. Or, what he had to say about teaching and learning is not what we find in practice today. Or, what he had to say leaves open many more possibilities than are available in practice today.”

“Such a critique of Waldorf school practices immediately begs a central question: If Waldorf education is not to be known by its trappings and myths, where is its core? What is essential to teaching and learning in Waldorf schools? I have given this a lot of thought over the past few years, and will address this question in another article. In the meanwhile, an excellent approach to such a question may be found in Susan Howard’s “The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education” ([Read the article on the IASWECE website](#)) It concerns early childhood teachers, but much of the content applies to all teachers. Howard’s method, too, may be fruitful for all teachers.”

The article then describes 22 examples of practices that are often considered essential characteristics of Waldorf Education but which, according to Steve Sagarin, were not intended as such by Rudolf Steiner. Here are a few examples that are also relevant for the kindergarten:

“3. Black”

“Steiner’s remarks about black, in his color lectures, for example, are not represented in his education lectures. The idea of a prohibition on the use of black, in drawing or in clothing, cannot be found in his education lectures. Steiner himself wore black nearly every day. Children still loved him.

This is not to dispute the quality of black as a color or the idea that it may not be an appropriate color for young children to use. When teachers remove black, however, leaving white, pink, and brown in the box of crayons, they create a circumstance in which children with pink skin and brown hair, for example, can draw themselves and their families, but children with black hair cannot. Thoughtful teachers may remove all “earth” colors to induce children to draw with the colors of the rainbow, introducing black at the same time that they introduce other such colors.”

“4. Circle Time”

"Rudolf Steiner never spoke about circle time, and his descriptions of "main lesson" do not include corresponding concepts. "Circle time" is an educational phenomenon of the late 1970s and 1980s, especially in the U.K., in public schools in particular, brought into Waldorf schools by an unknown route." ...

There's nothing necessarily or inherently wrong with circle time, but to claim circle time as a unique or necessary part of Waldorf school early childhood and elementary schools is clearly wrong. To believe that it originates in Steiner's work is also wrong.

"5. Consensus"

"Steiner has little to say about school decision-making and does not use the word consensus or its possible German correlates. When Henry Monges asked Steiner about the process for selecting General Secretaries for the Anthroposophical Societies in various countries, Steiner replied:

"This is a further matter which I would not wish to lay down in any way by means of statutes for the various groups all over the world. I can well imagine, for example, that there are national Societies who will most certainly want to employ democratic procedures. I can also imagine that there will be others who will want to be thoroughly aristocratic in their approach... Thus I rather assume that the, shall I say, somewhat aristocratic method I have adopted with regard to appointing the Vorstand may well be imitated. In some quarters, however, this method may be regarded as highly undesirable, and in those quarters the democratic method could be used."

"7. Early Childhood Education"

"Few people know that the first school in Stuttgart had a kindergarten for only about 6 months during Steiner's life; it ceased existence before he died, I believe, because the school needed the space as it grew. Further, Steiner's educational lectures contain much about the development of young children but little about their actual education. Given his view of child development, it is easy to laud the growth of Waldorf early childhood programs, but their practices—silks, sing-song voices, rosy walls—cannot often be said to represent direct indications of Steiner himself. Consequently, we can imagine other forms of early childhood education that appear different but that equally fulfill Steiner's intentions. Howard's essay, referenced above, is a healthy look in the right direction."

"11. Festivals"

"Steiner spoke beautifully, powerfully, repeatedly, and in depth about religious festivals and their meanings. These lectures, however, occur outside the context of his educational lectures. It is not a bad thing that schools participate in annual festivals and rituals as described by Steiner except in two cases: The first is when these are represented as part and parcel of Waldorf education. They are not; as cultures and traditions change, and as schools are founded in non-Christian nations, it is appropriate that the festivals and rituals celebrated at a school will change, too. The second occurs when schools that are multicultural do not recognize this, and marginalize, say, a Jewish segment of the school population through representations of Christian festivals. It is appropriate to include many different festivals in the school, or to move all festivals outside of school hours, or, as in Austria itself, to leave festivals to the local community, separate from the school." ([read the article from Vera Hoffmann on this theme](#))

“22. Waldorf Dolls”

“Steiner advocates tying knots in a handkerchief and adding inkblots to make a doll. This is a far cry from the \$56, natural material kits—available from Martha Stewart—from which we now produce our legions of “genuine” Waldorf dolls. [“\(Read the article about this topic in the IASWECE Newsletter 12/2017\)”](#)

Stephen Sagarin, Ph.D., is a graduate of the Waldorf School of Garden City, NY. He teaches history and art at the Berkshire Waldorf High School in Massachusetts, and is Associate Professor in Waldorf Teacher Education at Sunbridge Institute in NY. His blog is called [“What is Education?”](#) Dr. Sagarin’s most recent book is *The Story of Waldorf Education in the United States: Past, Present, and Future*.