

Practical and Ethical Considerations

The basis for a school-wide, all-students approach to learning foundations

by Jeff Tunkey and Amanda Boyler

The purpose of this article is to describe—and advocate for—a comprehensive spectrum of whole-class programs and individual support services. To begin, let us look at two practical aspects of Waldorf education that by their nature will lead us to focus on related ethical considerations; by keeping these two issues in focus, we can gain additional strengths for our Michaelic educational journey.

First, our academic paths are in some ways “slower” and less test-bound than is common today. For writing and reading, we take the stance that parents can be patient, and not fret, if their student hasn’t begun book reading in grade one, or two, or even three. For arithmetic, we are supposed to be working, first, to have the student “at home in the house of numbers” before emphasizing skill-and-drill learning.

Therefore, we believe, Waldorf schools have a heightened ethical responsibility to observe carefully each child’s developmental foundations and capacities. Yes, it is right to provide daily learning challenges yet still leave early-grades students free to awaken to intellectual tasks at a harmonious pace. However, of course it would not be ethically upright for a school or teacher to wait until third grade (or later) to find out that a student actually lacks the foundations for the light to go on, nor for a school to wait to begin filling in the developmental and assessment blanks until there is a crisis with a parent or parents.

A second set of practical considerations may sometimes lead parents and schools to meet each other at an intersection of weaknesses. Parents who begin investigating a switch to Waldorf education when their child is in grade two or above, are often seeking an answer to a question that in some regards they wish to avoid bringing into focus: their child is struggling or even suffering in a current school, and they are seeking relief—but not (for instance) a learning-disability label. And, very often, Waldorf schools struggle with enrollment and

financial needs that leave them open to accepting a broad range of student and family profiles. The ethical consideration is: “If we accept this child, can we serve and educate him as well as or better than any of the alternatives? Have we objectively and realistically weighed her needs and our pedagogical abilities, or do we feel pressure to ‘give it a try’ and hope for the best?”

After many years of wrestling with this second practical/ethical issue, we have come up with an approach that helps us keep it real. When there is an application for a new student in any grade, we examine four qualitative questions:

1. Does the student have the will to work?
2. Does the student have the academic ability to meet the curriculum?
3. Do the parents support the pedagogical values of Waldorf education?
4. Is the student likely to be a positive social addition to the class constellation?

Our rule of thumb is that positive answers to at least three of these questions will be needed in order for the student to thrive, and for us to carry out our professional responsibility. These same four points of relationship evaluation may come up again at any time during a student’s career at our school. Before addressing how these can be observed over time, we will now outline the Educational Support Program at Aurora Waldorf.

School-wide, all-students

Aurora Waldorf, founded in 1991, was very fortunate that in its formative years several of its teachers were able to immerse themselves in studying Extra Lesson™ with Mary Jo Oresti, Rachel Ross and other leading lights in the Waldorf remedial movement; and also Spacial Dynamics™ with Jaimen McMillan and Maureen Curran. Thanks to the wealth of pedagogical insights these trainings provided, and the steadfast support of the AWS faculty up to the present, a unique program was created

and has continued to be strengthened. Our hope is that in presenting the model we've followed, readers may find elements they can add at their schools.

A guiding principle that we gleaned from these trainings is that "All students need support!" That is, the movement, drawing and painting exercises found in the Extra Lesson and other anthroposophic sources are not meant only for one-on-one use by struggling students who are sent to a special room; rather, all students benefit from doing them. For instance, many of the activities serve to align one with the currents of the Earth, and contain a harmonizing, focusing element... and who doesn't need that from time to time!

At AWS, resource allocations and personnel have shifted somewhat from one year to the next, but the broad outlines have remained the same. The ingredients of our integrated "full spectrum" program in the grades are:

1. Recess outdoors every day.
2. At least two games/gym classes a week, plus one tumbling/gymnastics class. (Middle school students have gym every day, for a total of 6 periods per week.)
3. An additional class called "Enrichment" in Grades 1, 2 and 3; this provides whole-class time for Extra Lesson and developmental movement activities.
4. Two Eurythmy classes per week.
5. Classroom inservices: Extra Lesson teachers work with class teachers to model and mentor a core of whole-class remedial exercises, helping them add these to their repertoire of Main Lesson activities.¹
6. Protocol for a progression of student assessments, including:
 - First grade readiness
 - Second grade assessment (blend of "First Lesson" and "Dutch model")
 - Standardized reading and math screenings in fourth grade
7. Individual student services provided by AWS:
 - Therapeutic Eurythmy
 - Extra Lesson
 - Remedial Reading
 - Remedial Math
 - Assisted study hall

Pullouts: minuses or pluses?

Individual or small-group services may take place on a weekly, bi-weekly, or daily basis depending on the needs of the child. Students are pulled out for sessions during all parts of the day: from morning recess, the book-work portion of Main Lesson, an Extra Main, or a subject class (movement and Eurythmy classes are usually excluded). Schedule planning seeks to find the least-interruptive schedule based on each student's need. Naturally, no class or subject teacher would wish for any student to miss even one period, to have less of their subject – let alone to be away over an extended schedule. Nonetheless, teachers at AWS have come to accept over the years that students who need individual support are, in a manner of speaking, not actually "getting" their class, i.e. not able to fully benefit until more concentrated help is given. And by focusing the majority of our remedial resources on the earlier grades, the need for pullouts has proven to be reduced by the time a student reaches the older, more academically-concentrated upper grades.

The AWS Assessment Protocol

At AWS, first grade readiness assessments are conducted in the spring of the school year and completed before Easter break. One guideline AWS tries to follow is to allow children to have six Easters before being assessed. Before assessments begin, a "First Grade Ripeness" form is given to our Kindergarten teachers to complete.² This form contains information such as the physical, social and behavioral aspects of the child. The other side of the form is the "First Grade Readiness" assessment record, which will be filled in while the child is with the examiner. Ideally, the incoming first grade teacher who will be receiving the children will be present to observe and take notes during the assessments. If not, the Kindergarten teachers can fulfill this task.

Each child patiently awaits his or her turn to come and "play games" during Main Lesson time. They become very excited about this opportunity. The assessment takes 45 minutes to an hour. The child may have to come back a second time depending on the circumstances.

When all assessments are completed, the results are shared with the Kindergarten teachers, and reports are sent home with recommendations and our suggestion of placement for the following year. After Easter break, one to two faculty meetings are also reserved for the sharing

of the first grade folders. The examiner as well as the Kindergarten teachers present each folder, discussing the background of each child, some anecdotes, observations and results of the assessment. This helps to paint a picture of the class for the new first grade teacher as well as subject teachers.

Second grade assessments begin in the fall and take a bit longer than first grade readiness. Again, each child patiently awaits his or her turn to “play games.” We use a blend of the “First Lesson” from Audrey McAllen and the ‘Dutch Assessment’; we add activities for math and literacy foundations such as solving basic math problems, writing the alphabet and reading a progression of simple sight words. There is also the addition of many drawings signifying milestones of development, such as crossing midlines and laterality. Each assessment runs for an hour and again takes place during Main Lesson time. Ideally, it would take a month to complete a class. The examiner and class teacher meet to discuss each assessment, and any needs or services a child may need. Reports are written and sent home with a full picture of how the child is doing developmentally for his or her age, and parents may also schedule a meeting.

Every year beginning after Christmas break, the fourth grade is given a standardized reading and mathematics assessment. The examiner uses the Basic Reading Inventory, by Jerry Johns, Second Edition. This form assesses fluency, decoding, reading rate, comprehension, and sight-word knowledge. Each child is taken out for a 15 to 20 minute period to complete this portion of the assessment. Accompanying this are two tasks assigned to the class teacher to complete with the students: a spelling inventory from Words Their Way, and an independent writing sample. The remedial teacher provides the spelling list, corrects the results, and also corrects the results of the independent writing sample based on a developmental writing continuum. By this time, if students are not on grade level according to the results of the assessment, a meeting will be requested with the parents and additional services will be encouraged (see below).

The math portion of the fourth grade assessment is done after spring break so that most of the grade level material has been instructed and reinforced. The examiner and the year’s 4th grade teacher meet to go over the material that has been covered, and the assessment is

adjusted accordingly. Ideally, this assessment touches on all four operations, as well as long division, multidigit multiplication, money, measurement, time, and fractions. Students are given two pretests with similar questions to familiarize them with the form. The final is given by the teacher, and then corrected by the examiner.

Both reports – reading and math – are written together. The class teacher is given a copy and the other is sent home to the parents. The measurement is: below, on, or above grade level for both subjects.

As a result of any of the assessments stated above, students may be referred to individual or small group services. At Aurora Waldorf school, we offer Therapeutic Eurythmy, Extra Lesson, remedial reading, and math instruction.

AWS Educational Support Services

Therapeutic Eurythmy, which means “harmonious rhythm,” is a holistic therapy which addresses issues of imbalance on a physical, constitutional as well as the emotional and spiritual realms. This therapy can assist such stages of development as formation of teeth, helping to heal bedwetting and many other challenges. Therapeutic Eurythmy is partly funded by AWS. Programs such as A.T.H.E.N.A., The Eurythmy Association of North America (eana.org), and Physicians Association of Anthroposophic Medicine (www.paam.net/anthromed) assist parents and AWS to pay for the therapy sessions. Students are seen in six-week blocks, usually early in the morning either before school, or during morning recess. The sessions happen twice per week for 30 minutes. Each child may have one or two blocks a year. Letters and reports are sent home to parents to discuss progress and advice on how to continue the work in the home.

Extra Lesson can be recommended for a variety of reasons. Typically at AWS, students who receive Extra Lesson are from the ages of 6 to 11. Recommendations can come from any of the assessments discussed above, the Educational Support Team, the Phys. Ed. Teacher, the Class Teacher, parents, and so on. Children are also observed during whole-class inservices to see if they need assistance with jumping rope, laterality, breathing, anxiety, focusing, etc. Extra Lesson usually happens on a one-on-one basis, but some children benefit from being in a small group.

The schedule works on a six week block. The time can vary from 15 minute to 45 minute sessions. There are some children who just need to learn to jump rope for example, and other students have lists of goals to achieve. The students who need more assistance will either be kept on all year or receive a block in the fall and the spring.

A typical Extra Lesson session starts with a verse, heads into movement and ends with either a painting or drawing, giving the children the appropriate amount of inbreath and outbreath. Only a few exercises are done in each session to ensure imprinting and integration of the habit body. After a student has achieved his or her goal, the difficulty of the activity increases, or a new goal is put into place.

After each block, a report is sent home to update the parents in their child's progress and also to give home support while the child is not being seen. Often parents are given instructions to perform simple exercises with the child at home. A meeting may be held if necessary.

Remedial reading and math instruction can begin anywhere from the middle of second grade through eighth grade. Recommendations can come from any of the above assessments as well as from parent/teacher concerns. Students can either be pulled out for instruction, or the teacher can push in, based on the needs in the class or relevance of activity. Class teachers give the remedial teacher an overview of the skills that the child needs support with as well as materials he or she may be using in class. At AWS, our remedial reading and math offerings are considered as AIS level – Academic Intervention Services. This instruction is below the level of an IEP or Individualized Education Plan, and would not replace an IEP or private tutoring.

Assisted study hall is for upper-grades students who need extra time to complete work or have received accommodations on their education plan. These accommodations happen within the school and are coordinated between the Educational Support Team, the child's Class Teacher, and parents. If a student is seen as having significant difficulty in math or language arts, he or she may be exempt from a foreign language or musical instrument class, thereby gaining study hall time with the remedial teacher. The student brings homework, a project, or a test that the teacher will assist with.

Learning is movement, movement is learning

A movement program that's solidly based on the developmental needs of children can have many school-wide benefits, including reduced need for remedial services, and reduced teacher burnout because classes are more ready for daily academics. At AWS, we have proven to ourselves that an extended program of play and movement strengthens the developmental foundations needed for success in the grades and beyond, and is complementary to the remedial program.

Two keys to the thinking behind this approach might be as follows. First, Rudolf Steiner indicated that our task as educators is to "teach the children to breathe." Perhaps for our modern times this might be better translated as "help the children learn to self-regulate." Secondly, Waldorf schools are supposed to provide—month after month and year after year—a progression of academic content for which the students are emotionally and physiologically ready, and at the same time helps them take the next step.

Movement lessons can certainly make a contribution in both respects. Through age-appropriate movement, the developing human can gain basics like postural control, spatial orientation, movement coordination, the ability to change sight perception instantaneously between three-dimensional and two-dimensional space, good body geography, and confirmed dominance. Thus, we must remember that through movement, every child can be helped in some way to reach his or her full potential.

Again, our experience at AWS has shown that classes of students who are provided with appropriate daily movement activities are able to move ahead more solidly. Benefits of these activities have included strengthened foundations for literacy, numeracy and deskwork capacities.

Outside Services

For students whose needs are greater than can be addressed at the in-house AIS level, we are fortunate to have a network of skilled outside professionals to both complement and supplement our in-house services. For developmental issues, this includes coordinated services with a local Occupational Therapist certified in Sensory Integration, and a Developmental Optometrist who has taken the time to understand our approach. In New York

state, the public school district in which a private school is located will provide additional evaluations and services at the private school during the regular school day.

Process for Student Placement

As noted earlier, we consider it an important duty to maintain a picture of whether our school is a good (or, the best) placement for each individual; and we use a framework of four interrelated questions to help us with this ultimately subjective task. For students applying for a placement in a grade, from another school setting, our process is –

Our application form will help us identify points for further conversation with the family before admission. For instance, a family seeking to place a student with support needs when the family lists school-age siblings who don't have support needs and will continue in their existing school, may in some cases perceive Waldorf as a remedial school, or an artistic school, or a school with an unstructured approach.

One or more days 'shadowing': attending Main Lesson, recess, lunch, subject classes and all other parts of the day. All teachers who see the student fill out a form addressing the four questions. The shadowing day will give us a good first impression about will to work, social harmony, contribution to the class constellation, and how our curriculum seems to resonate with the student.

During the shadowing day, the student is given an Educational Evaluation which will include, as age appropriate, elements of the Second Grade Assessment, reading and math screenings, etc.

We require all records from previous schooling and evaluations prior to the shadowing day. Our application form includes specific questions about whether the student has in the past received any support services or Ed Psych evals, has had an IEP, etc.

In cases where there is some doubt whether our school (or sometimes, just the grade placement requested) is fitting, we convene an Admissions task group consisting of the Grade teacher(s), Educational Support, selected subject teachers, and the Admissions Director.

In any event, after we've completed those steps, we have a meeting with the parents which includes the Class teacher, the EST staff who have participated in our evaluations, and others as needed. This is often a good time to flesh out questions that may still remain from

either side, to discuss media and other home support aspects, and in many ways to get things started as a team. If the decision is to not admit the student, the meeting can have the purpose of providing the parents with our opinions of other schooling or support avenues for them to pursue.

Conclusion

After years of training and personal work, Jeff Tunkey worked with the two remedial-trained pioneering class teachers at AWS to begin the remedial program at Aurora Waldorf School, using his Spacial Dynamics education as a starting point. He began educating the teachers and the parent community through workshops, child studies, class studies, and other forms of pedagogy to make the blended movement/remedial program part of the overall culture of the school. Amanda, coming from a Literacy and English background has incorporated her Waldorf remedial training into a program that continues this work.

Jeff, Amanda, and the school's Eurythmist, Maria Ebersole, work together to provide a comprehensive program for all students. Every child needs remedial education and movement. Observing children through movement classes, inservices, recess, subject classes, and Main Lesson can provide tremendous insight into the needs of our students. It is through these classes and other modalities that the faculty can bring forth questions and recommend assessments for individual services based on the development of the child.

The Educational Support Team at Aurora Waldorf School has over many years become an integral part of the curriculum; the glue that holds the education together. This article has been written so that schools thinking of incorporating a remedial program into their school culture can see how a successful program can thrive.

About the authors

Jeff Tunkey and Amanda Boyler are members of the Educational Support Team at Aurora Waldorf School, a school near Buffalo, New York with about 170 students in Early Childhood through Grade 8. At AWS since 1991, Jeff teaches games/gym/gymnastics and team sports; he has also taught Extra Lesson, served as the Educational Support Coordinator, and as the Chair of the College of Teachers. He completed the five-year Spacial Dynamics training, and a mentored self-education program for Extra

Lesson. He is currently a board member and instructor for the Association of Healing Education, which provides remedial teacher development. More information about Jeff is available on the AHE website.

Amanda Boyler, who joined AWS in 2010, is the current Extra Lesson teacher as well as the Educational Support Coordinator. She has an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education with a concentration in English, from Buffalo State College, and a Master's degree in Literacy Education from Medaille College. She has completed a year of Spacial Dynamics, the two-year HEART Program (Healing Education and Remedial Training) with Rachel Ross, and Jeff's 12-month "Scaffold for Waldorf Education" course. In the summer of 2012, she attended the International Extra Lesson Conference entitled: "The Human Archetype." For the past two summers, she has also taught the remedial portion of the one-week movement intensive Jeff provides for Waldorf teachers from around North America. She is also a current member of the Aurora Leadership Circle, representing as chair of her department.