

# What enables Waldorf learners to maintain engagement in reading over time?

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**ABSTRACT.** There are key strategies used by Waldorf teachers to enable children to maintain their engagement in reading over time. Through research-based commentaries and examples, this manuscript describes certain characteristics of teachers' language strategies that maximise reading interest and development. The article focuses on teachers' spoken language and how the act of writing supports the process of learning to read with confidence, facilitating the development of persistent engagement and a love for reading.

*Keywords:* Reading development, Waldorf language approach, long-term engagement, free storytelling, confidence

## Introduction

How do Waldorf teachers motivate children to learn to read? What makes children maintain their engagement in reading through time? This paper aims to answer these questions by presenting research and theory, as well as by highlighting specific aspects of the Waldorf approach based on my own research experience as a participant observer in Waldorf schools.

Student engagement is defined as a “relatively public, objective, and observable classroom event” (Reeve, 2012, p. 167). It is an individual process and relates to all interactions that take place in the classroom (Schlag, 2021), including the interaction between learning material, peers, and teachers (Montenegro, 2017b). One way to analyse engagement is by considering four dimensions, namely behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and agentic (see more details on student engagement in Reeve, 2013).

As a general example of engagement in reading interventions, teachers may (a) consider their students' attention during the act of reading (behavioural engagement), (b) enjoyment during reading (emotional engagement), (c) effort to comprehend the story or unknown vocabulary (cognitive engagement), and (d) interest in helping others to understand the reading material (agentic engagement).

Characteristics of the Waldorf language approach imply an initial and strong emphasis on emotional engagement (Montenegro, 2017a). As Cambria and Guthrie (2010) phrase it, “skill and will (motivation) go together” (p. 16). As learners gain confidence, they are “willing to work harder and can more readily learn.” (Au, 2005, p. 175). The prioritisation of pedagogies that support students' emotional engagement is important, as these have very positive effects on the teaching staff and students' learning and long-term outcomes (Kelly et al., 2022). For Waldorf teachers, the affective dimension helps learners to develop language skills with confidence (Montenegro, 2007).

Reading is a skill that children take years to acquire because it requires brain maturity (Chubarovsky, 2022). Standard teaching practices that emphasise early recognition of the alphabet do not guarantee long-term engagement (Suggate et al., 2013b). Johnson (2010) argues that our obsession with early literacy does not allow the right side of the brain to create inner mental pictures and scenes. For reading to be a pleasure, one of the essential requirements is to be able to create mental images (Chubarovsky, 2022).

According to Johnson (2010), true reading happens when mental pictures are created in the frontal areas of the right brain and words are phonetically identified using the left brain. By using both hemispheres simultaneously, children can create mental pictures and sound-out words phonetically, enabling easier verbal language skill development. Johnson highlights the value of cross-lateral movement activities with arms and legs before and during reading learning processes, as well as phonetic-based reading programs to alternate reading using the right brain (sight memory) to reading using the left brain to develop bilateral integration of hemispheres. Waldorf teachers strongly value spoken language with movement from first class: finger games, recitation with body language, games that require balance and walking, among others.

In the Waldorf curriculum, each story is carefully selected and presented through a variety of movements (e.g., cross-lateral movements), form drawing, poetry, and free storytelling. All support the process of learning vocabulary and progressively discovering relationships among sounds and letters. Encouraging children to move helps them to develop and strengthen neural pathways, laying the foundation for further development in literacy (Amor-Zitzelberger, 2020).

## Favouring Spoken Language

Among Waldorf pedagogy's notable aspects are the alignment of the curriculum with the stages of child development and cognitive awakening (Mitchell, 2006). In this respect, Bowen (2022) states,

“The ideal of Waldorf education is that the curriculum will arise quite naturally from our understanding of child development and our keen observations and contemplations of the actual children before us.”

Children start school when they turn seven years old. In most cases this begins after two years in Waldorf Kindergartens, in which written language and reading instruction are excluded to encourage the development of oral language through artistic activities (e.g., painting, drawing, cooking), games, singing, and free storytelling (Chubarovsky, 2022).

Standard teaching practices consider that the sooner children recognize letters and sounds, the more quickly they become proficient readers (Suggate et al., 2013b). For children who attend Waldorf schools, they usually start when they turn seven years old. In most cases, this begins after two years in Waldorf Kindergartens, during which written language and reading instruction are excluded. Without early academic pressure, children learn to use their hands and fingers before literacy, which helps them to pick up reading faster and more competently (Rawson & Richter, 2000).

Instead of focusing on developing decoding-related skills between the ages of five and seven, Waldorf teachers favour spoken language, which develops a strong foundation for later reading skills (Suggate et al., 2013b). They speak directly to the children through verses, songs, and stories while framing and supporting the spoken word with facial expressions and gestures (Kiersch, 2015). Oral language is encouraged through artistic activities (e.g., painting, drawing, cooking), games, singing, and free storytelling (Chubarovsky, 2022), which later contributes to reading comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Sénéchal et al., 2006).

According to Burnett (2007), the Waldorf approach to reading encompasses both phonics and whole-word teaching, combining this with a traditional spelling method. This process begins through the artistic introduction of the letters and their corresponding sounds. Thus, towards the end of first grade and in second grade, children learn to identify the relation between words and letters (Suggate et al., 2013b). After the process of acquiring a set of consonants and vowels, smaller phonemic and graphemic components for

writing are explored (Burnett, 2007). The learning objective is to unveil letters and sounds, as well as to communicate ideas, instead of parroting back words or guessing them without comprehension.

Simultaneously, two foreign languages are introduced from first grade by allowing children „to enter emotionally into the stream of listening to and experiencing the language“ (Röh, 2013, p. 10). In second grade, there is an emphasis on phonics (sounds encoded by written letters) (Rawson & Richter, 2000) during which children begin to learn the skills of word-building.

A transformative awakening occurs in children at the age of 9 or 10 as they “begin to experience the language more consciously“ (Röh, 2013). In Steiner’s words, “the change in the children’s self-awareness grows stronger at the age of nine” and “they understand much better” what the teacher says about the difference between the human being and the world” (2000, p. 101). Later children in fourth grade begin to consciously explore grammatical structures through verses they know well, gradually reaching a new level of self-awareness (Röh, 2013).

A two-year study comparing early versus late readers found that late readers catch up to comparable levels later on, even surpassing the early readers in comprehension abilities. The results showed that the children who started the process of learning to read earlier read significantly better than the Waldorf pupils. However, at the age of 9 and 10, both groups had a similar reading fluency. At the age of 11, Waldorf pupils showed a better performance in reading comprehension compared to the state school pupils, and both groups were evaluated as almost equal at the age of 12. These findings suggest that “success at reading is not assured by an earlier beginning” (Suggate et al., 2013b, p. 45).

## A Path for Long-Term Engagement in Reading

A Waldorf teacher “is always a narrator” (Steinmann, 2012, p. 16) and focuses on free storytelling as the major learning tool in language development (Easton, 1997). The Waldorf curriculum is thus rich in stories, ranging from nature stories and fairy tales, through great myths and legends, to biographies and historical accounts (Logan, 2022).

The emphasis on storytelling aims to positively influence language development as well as maximise children’s creativity and artistic work. According to Chubarovsky (2022), storytelling is the best way to create a love for reading because children have time to imagine (inner creation) those images that are described in detail by the narrator. Put simply, teaching through story engages children’s imagination (Bowen, 2022).

Oral modality can be done through independent reading, a variant on shared reading (taking simultaneous turns by adult and child), or free storytelling (telling a story from the heart and usually without a book) (Suggate, 2014). Suggate and his colleagues (2013b) conducted experimental research on the influence of oral modality in grade two (pupils with an average age of 8), and 17 children in grade four (average age of 10). They compared children’s vocabulary acquisition from reading versus hearing a story in class, including differences among (a) independent reading, (b) a variant on shared reading (taking simultaneous turns by adult and child), and (c) free storytelling.

Children performed best on the target-unfamiliar words presented via the free storytelling condition, followed by the adult read-aloud, and finally the independent reading. Aside from modality, age/grade was an important factor. Children in grade four performed better than children in grade two in the independent reading and adult read-aloud conditions. Suggate et al. (2013b) state that children with accomplished reading comprehension skills may learn more vocabulary items from hearing a story than from reading it independently. It seems that free storytelling “enables the teller to devote more attention to the audience, tailor prosody and capture their interest through animated body language” (Suggate et al., 2013a, p. 567). Free storytelling obtained the highest scores on the vocabulary test, and adult read-aloud storytelling was found to be a more effective means to improve vocabulary development than independent text reading. As the findings show, even for grade four, free storytelling is important for vocabulary development (Suggate et al., 2013b).

Storytelling can remind children that spoken words are powerful and that listening is important while also stimulating creativity and fantasy as well as arousing curiosity and attention (Dörnyei, 2001). It provides opportunities to increase children's interest and attention through more eye contact, spontaneous usage of props to explain the story, and prosodic features (Suggate et al., 2013a).

The power of storytelling lies in its ability to deeply connect learners to the content of a lesson through voice and gestures (Bowen, 2022). Narrating without reading (free storytelling) is particularly useful for allowing teachers to make more gestures and use visual supports such as puppets, thereby making it easier for learners to pay attention (Chubarovsky, 2022). Story repetition is one crucial aspect, enabling teachers to go beyond entertaining and keeping children busy through stories and thus enhancing both children's emotional and cognitive development (Chubarovsky, 2022) while exploring the beauty of language.

In the Waldorf main lessons (Blockunterricht in German), children learn to create their reading material from fairy tales, fables, folk tales, myths, legends, poems, tongue twisters, poetry, biographies, and simple word games. Coloured pencils and main lesson books are daily-use tools. In this way, Waldorf learners create their own textbooks and book covers with drawings and useful information that they can later read at home or at school. When children are older, they learn to read "by reading what they have written or what the teacher has written on the board" with a significant portion of the content already familiar to them (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p. 108).

Progressively, Waldorf teachers start with the introduction of upper-case letters and later lower-case letters, taking into account that letter orientation needs time to be distinguished and identified, for example in the cases of d/b/p/q (Rawson & Richter, 2000). Consonants are taught first with sounds and stories that are found in images of the outside world (van Alphen, 2009). The stories are told through details, enabling many learners to be able to retell the story the following day. Learners are encouraged to retell the stories.

For each story told in first grade, a consonant is derived from a picture drawn to illustrate the story the following day. The teacher tells rather than reads a story and paints a drawing on the chalkboard with the form of the letter that was learned during the free storytelling. For example, the letter M can be illustrated by two mountain peaks and saying that the sound M is the first sound we hear when pronouncing the word "mountains". Some descriptions are explored in class giving enough time to participate. Then, the story will be reviewed and finished probably during the next session.

After acquiring familiarity with a set of consonants and vowels, smaller phonemic and graphemic components of writing are explored (Burnett, 2007). Due to their ability to allow children express emotions and inner moods (e.g., surprise), vowels are taught when the Waldorf learners have already learnt a set of consonants and "have become used to linking a sound with a specific letter-shape" (van Alphen, 2009, p. 55).

The transition from writing and then reading occurs through repeatedly listening to a repertoire of stories and rhymes, discovering lyrics through a particular story, connecting an image with a letter, and emotions with expressions. This also enables teachers to work from an interdisciplinary perspective. Bowen (2022) explains that stories are the foundations for many future lessons in parallel school subjects. In his own words,

"... The Waldorf teacher derives future lessons from the images and events conveyed in stories. A first grade maths lesson can be based, for example, on the Grimm's fairytale, „The Twelve Brothers“. A second grade language arts lesson can be easily developed out of the fable „The Fox and the Grapes“. A fourth grade biology lesson can be brought out of a Norse Myth. By doing this, the teacher brings to the student the „colder“ and more abstract aspects of the lessons through the vehicle of the story imaginations. These more abstract lessons include symbolic language work (writing and reading) and symbolic numeric processes (mathematics). The child encounters these lessons within the context of stories vividly told to them, of stories that they imagined, building rich and meaningful imaginations within themselves. Thus, the ensuing lessons are „pre-warmed“, presented and exercised within their own soul-wrought imaginations."

In addition to free storytelling, the poetic and dramatic dimensions of the lessons and curriculum are emphasised at all levels of language learning in Waldorf schools (Templeton, 2010). With poetry, one activity

Waldorf teachers use to help learners engage with the language in an artistic process is to take a simple poem and have the children change a few words, aiming to find rhyming words (Bowen, 2022). The use of music as a review process includes the process of poetry. In this way, music and poetry are a playful way to stimulate the imagination through language and melody (Bowen, 2022).

Reading development comes alive in the upper grades through free reading, recitation, choral reading, and reading aloud. Elements such as fast/slow, tense/relaxed, high/low pitch are considered by the teacher before the lesson starts (van Oort, 2002). For example, during recitation, the teacher can start by saying a couple of lines with the whole group, then reducing it to half the class, then to five pupils, and finally to two. According to van Oort (2002), this exercise allows weaker learners to lose shyness and memorise the text.

Creating a safe environment for self-expression and reading is interconnected in the Waldorf curriculum. For example, during choral reading, the weaker learners are supported by the more skilled ones with none of the embarrassment of special attention in front of the others while they gain confidence (van Oort, 2002).

Students' first reason for being a dedicated reader is that the reading material is relevant to them (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). Quality literature according to students' cognitive and emotional stage should be selected. This consideration of both literary and emotional stages of growth is a prominent feature of the Waldorf language approach (e.g., during the period of adolescence). For example, in middle school, students seek freedom and are often keen to read about people's experiences of freedom (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010).

## Conclusion

Waldorf teachers motivate children to learn to read through a variety of teaching methods integrated in the Waldorf language approach. Waldorf language teachers recognise the power of sounds, oral modalities, movement activities, drawings, and appropriate selection of quality literature. As an initial and powerful pedagogical strategy, free storytelling facilitates emotional engagement and provides an adequate path for language development. Teachers' spoken language and the whole curriculum lead children progressively to learn to read with confidence. Gradual confidence makes children maintain their engagement in reading over time.

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