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# **Arts-Embedded Education: Experiential Learning in a Waldorf First Grade Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

This article provides an overview of the first-grade art and literacy curriculum of Waldorf schools, the world's largest, non-religious, independent educational network. The Waldorf curriculum was created by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, a contemporary of John Dewey and Maria Montessori, who shared their belief in the advantages of active learning and the importance of providing educational opportunities for students from working class families. Yet Steiner was unique among his contemporaries in his strong focus on artistic approaches to learning. Under the teacher's direction, young children in Waldorf classrooms paint, sing, play, listen to stories and eagerly learn to read through drawing pictures that represent the sounds made by various letters of the alphabet.

## **Introduction**

This article is based on a research study that looked at first-grade classrooms in three independent Waldorf schools in California. These schools served differing (urban, suburban and semi-rural) student populations, making it possible to explore how the curriculum was integrated into varied social contexts, as well as the role that the arts played in early literacy instruction. We focus on the integration of art and literacy, because anxiety about the adequate teaching of literacy skills—as measured by standardized testing in the later grades—has helped squeeze art and music out of early elementary classrooms in U.S. public schools (Bassok, Latham & Rorem, 2016; Gara, Brouillette & Farkas, 2018). Successful integration of art and literacy instruction might facilitate the reintroduction of arts and crafts instruction in public schools. Using interviews, observations and student work, we explored:

- 1) How Waldorf teachers integrate art and literacy skills
- 2) How Waldorf teachers saw their role as “teacher”

### 3) How Waldorf teachers assess student learning

#### **Waldorf Schools in Historical Perspective**

Responding to the limited educational opportunities available to children from poor and working-class families in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, several international movements arose that advanced a more organic educational philosophy than was offered by the widely-implemented “factory model” of education. John Dewey in the U.S., Maria Montessori in Italy and Rudolf Steiner in Germany were among the innovators who advocated a child-centered model of education, emphasizing hands-on learning that included crafts, practical skills and the arts. Steiner also drew upon the educational theories of pioneer educators Comenius and Pestalozzi (Ullrich, 1994).

Dewey (1897) had an international following and argued powerfully that education should not revolve around acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but instead should focus on the realization of a child's full potential. Maria Montessori created a tradition of encouraging children to engage in self-disciplined learning through activities that focus on practical tasks taken from everyday life. These programs commonly serve children aged two to six years, creating settings in which children have the freedom to choose which activities to pursue and to learn at their own pace. Children are grouped in multi-age classrooms, so as to encourage older children to serve as role models and to help younger children.

In contrast to Montessori programs, Waldorf schools have a defined pedagogy, which is characterized by strong oversight and consistency across administratively separate schools (Edwards, 2002). Waldorf classes are usually guided by the same teacher from first through eighth grade. Formal literacy instruction begins in first grade, when the sounds of the letters of the alphabet are introduced. This allows younger children to focus on developing important social and oral language skills. The arts are integrated into every Waldorf lesson and assignment, for the act of teaching is itself regarded as an artistic endeavor. As Rudolf Steiner observed:

The heart of the Waldorf method is that education is an art—it must speak to the child’s experience. To educate the whole child, his heart and his will must be reached, as well as the mind. (Rudolf Steiner, 1954/1923)

#### **How Academically Effective is Waldorf Education?**

Comparing academic achievement in Waldorf schools and U.S. public schools can be difficult, given that independent Waldorf schools do not teach reading until first grade and are not required to carry out state-mandated standardized testing. Yet, some comparable student populations are available. In the decades since Minnesota passed the first U.S. charter school law in 1991, there has been a steady increase in the number of Waldorf-inspired public charter schools (which are required to take state-mandated standardized tests). Over 50 Waldorf-inspired charter schools have been opened in the U.S. since 1994 (Alliance for Public Waldorf Education, 2019). These charter schools, along with a smaller number of Waldorf-inspired magnet schools, implement Waldorf instructional methods while remaining public schools. This section looks at an intensive case study carried out on a Waldorf magnet school.

Research on the K-8 Alice Birney Public Waldorf School in the Sacramento City Unified School District in California was carried out by the Center for Opportunity Policy in Education at Stanford University (Friedlaender, Beckham, Zheng & Darling-Hammond, 2015). This study

showed that instructional approaches used at Birney led to strong student outcomes. Quantitative analysis of student record data revealed that, compared to similar students in other district schools, Birney students had low transiency and suspension rates, as well as positive student achievement outcomes on standardized assessments.

While outcomes were solid for all Birney students, outcomes were particularly strong for Birney's large population of African-American, Latino, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. African American and Latino students at Birney had a suspension rate one tenth the rate of similar students across the district. For African American, Latino and socio-economically disadvantaged students, the effect of attending Birney for five years was correlated with an increase of eight percentiles (i.e. from 50th percentile to 58th percentile) in English language arts achievement. This was despite Birney's adherence to the Waldorf tradition of delaying formal reading instruction until first grade, a curriculum without formal testing, and reliance on student-made "main lesson books" (portfolios)—as opposed to textbooks—for instruction. This suggests that Waldorf pedagogy may have special benefits for students from a disadvantaged background. As Laura Pappano (2011) noted in the *Harvard Education Letter*:

It sounds counterintuitive for struggling students to spend class time on, say, knitting and drawing. Yet, a small but growing number of public schools are embracing Waldorf methods in hopes of engaging students in ways advocates say traditional approaches do not—and raising test scores along the way.

### **Academic Achievement at German Waldorf Schools**

Germany currently has 242 independent Waldorf schools (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, n/a), compared to about 160 in the United States (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2020). Like the U.S., Germany has a federal system of government, where public education policy is in the hands of the states. In the most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, Waldorf and other alternative schools are subsidized relatively generously (Isenson, 2018), allowing children from less affluent families to attend. Elsewhere in Germany arrangements vary by state. But many Waldorf students receive some level of support and take state examinations. A 2012 study found that there was no statistically significant difference between the achievement of students in state schools and students in Waldorf schools on state examinations (Jiménez, 2012).

### **Philosophy behind the Waldorf Curriculum**

Eschewing a narrow focus on the intellect, Steiner derived his educational theory from his observation of thinking (cognition), feeling (emotion/affect) and willing (intentionality) in human beings (Alphen, 2011). In Steiner's view (1996), perception is an act of the will that gives rise to a "living picture" in the mind. A vivid image arises in the moment of perception, giving perception an "alive" quality. Perception is transformed into images by means of imagination. For example, when we listen to a story, we can perceive the images presented through the storyteller's words by using our imagination.

The "living pictures" Steiner (1996) speaks of may arise either from a subjective experience within our inner world or from an encounter with outer reality. Either way, it is experienced in the moment, which offers the possibility of finding meaning without the interference of preconceived ideas. This sense of immediacy keeps us from moving too readily into the formation of fixed concepts, which play a different role. Concepts the mind creates from

experience are mental constructs, which draw on the essence of our experience as we perceived it. These mental constructs are stored in memory and are used to build our knowledge of the world.

Steiner (1954) also spoke of another type of concept, which is not created by the learner. He pointed out that concepts could be either flexible or fixed, depending on how they were created. Fixed concepts were formed when mental constructs were simply adopted, not created out of the learner's own experience. One example of this process is rote learning based on textbooks, where students are asked to memorize the "finished product" of someone else's thinking. Steiner argued *against* teaching students rigid concepts that do not leave room for further growth in the learner's perceptions and understanding. This view has much in common with the orientation of many educators who believe in experiential education. Steiner explained:

The child must be given mobile concepts—concepts whose form is constantly changing as he becomes more mature. If we have a certain idea when we are forty years of age, it should not be a mere repetition of something we learnt when we were ten. It ought to have changed its form, just as our limbs and the whole of our organism have changed. (Steiner, 1954, p. 144)

Steiner (1968) held that the young child's ability to comprehend and engage is rooted in the imagination, which has a pictorial quality. He argued that, to help children develop flexible conceptual thinking, they must be given early on the opportunity to engage in active learning. To give young children this opportunity, Waldorf schools emphasize imaginative learning across the grades and curriculum. In Grades One to Four, such learning takes place mainly by means of stories and images, or through rhythm in music and poetry. The lessons are presented in human terms that encourage "participative" imagination (Alphen, 2011).

### **Elliott Eisner on Art and Perception**

Scholars continue to explore the connection between imagination and memory. Elliot Eisner (2002) saw forming representations of experience as the mind's essential function. He described these representations as having two functions: 1) furthering the individual's own understanding; and 2) communicating the meaning an individual has formed from input s/he had received to others. Like Steiner, Eisner connected images with imagination, pointing out that imagination enables us to visualize future situations with which we might eventually need to cope. The ability to anticipate future events gives us an opportunity for mental rehearsal. We can envision the consequences of various actions we might take through our imagination. This enables us to avoid taking the risks that would be inherent in exploring these alternatives in real life. Imagination also gives us the capacity to metaphorically step into the shoes of others and vicariously experience what they have experienced.

Eisner (2002) saw art as a vehicle for dealing with the evanescent, impermanent nature of human thoughts by inscribing images into lasting materials, enabling us to preserve the images and associated ideas for later use. Like Steiner, Eisner pointed to the importance of revisiting our ideas with fresh eyes, so that we could more carefully inspect, revise and extend them. In this way, Eisner echoed Steiner's argument against teaching students rigid concepts that did not leave room for further growth of the learner's perceptions and understanding. Like Steiner, Eisner held that, instead of jumping to judgment based on inherited assumptions, we are better off leaving room to fruitfully explore areas of uncertainty.

## **Research Methods**

In the next section, we will visit first-grade classrooms at three independent California Waldorf schools. This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of California, Irvine. We will focus on the first-grade class of 2017-18 at each school. One of the researchers has 15 years of experience teaching at an independent Waldorf school, while the other researcher is a university faculty member. Parents of the first graders had signed permission forms. Using interviews, observations and student work, we explored:

- 1) How Waldorf teachers integrate art and literacy skills
- 2) How Waldorf teachers saw their role as “teacher”
- 3) How Waldorf teachers assess student learning

In September 2017, independent Waldorf schools in California were contacted based on 2 criteria. The first was that the school was currently teaching students in first to eighth grades. The second was that the school be a full member of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA). All teachers in this study were female and began teaching their current class of 1<sup>st</sup> graders in fall 2017. The teachers each had between 20 and 28 students in their class. All three of the teachers have previous experience as a class teacher at a Waldorf school. Two of the teachers also held California teaching credentials.

### **Data Collection**

Data sources included samples of student work from the students’ “main lesson” books (provided by the teachers with that parents’ permission), teacher interviews (6 in total, providing 60 pages of data), archival data from individual schools, and field notes from observation in each classroom. We chose to focus on the literacy curriculum because little empirical research by external scholars currently exists on literacy instruction in U.S. Waldorf schools.

### **Student Work**

Teachers and students in Waldorf schools do not use textbooks as the primary means of instruction. Instead, the students create main lesson (ML) books that represent a snapshot of some of the learning that occurred in previous days. By the end of the year, students have created a portfolio that provides a tangible record of what they learned and the progress they made in the execution of their work. It was these first grade ML books that provided the student work data for this study. Three students were selected by each teacher (9 students, total) to represent the work students did in these books. All pages of these students’ Main Lesson books that were related to the language arts curriculum were digitally copied in color.

At the beginning of the school year, developmental levels in each class varied widely. First-graders ranged in age from just past their sixth birthday, to students who were approaching the age of seven. Yet, the arts-based literacy curriculum gave teachers leeway in meeting the needs of children at varied developmental levels. Each child was able to access the literacy curriculum through their own individual artistic experiences.

### **Interviews**

The three first-grade teachers were interviewed by one of the coauthors, who is an experienced Waldorf teacher. The interviews took place after the students completed their first-grade year. Two semi-structured interviews were carried out via phone and one was in person. The interviews were structured so that participants could direct the conversation to topics they

felt were important and the researcher could ask detailed clarification questions and/or solicit more information. Teachers were asked about their goals for the students in first grade—including academic, physical, and social-emotional goals—with the strongest focus on literacy objectives. The teachers were also asked how they went about pursuing those goals. Transcripts were typed verbatim and reviewed by the teachers for accuracy. Memos were used to record additional thoughts and questions stimulated by the transcript. Significant quotes, phrases and passages were highlighted. The interviews and field notes were then prepared for manual coding and analyzing.

### **Archival Records**

We gathered school-level policy papers on curriculum content, student assessment, instructional goals, and daily school schedules, along with school newsletters and records.

### **Research Findings**

A narrow description of the instructional methods used does not explain the alert receptiveness of the children in Waldorf classrooms or the enthusiasm with which they participated in lessons. To understand these aspects of the culture, one must appreciate the nature of the relationship between the Waldorf school, Waldorf teachers and their pupils.

### **Expectations for Waldorf teachers**

The largest of the three schools in the study had produced a formal document that served as a general guideline for teachers and information for parents regarding what to expect at a given grade level. Portions of that document have been summarized here, since expectations at all three schools were similar. Waldorf teachers have extensive freedom regarding methodology, teaching tools, choice of specific content and activities, as well as the order in which new skills are introduced. Beyond the general guidelines in the curriculum, a class teacher creates lessons and activities tailored to the needs and character of her or his individual class. At the beginning of the year, each class teacher is asked to present a personal adaptation of the Waldorf curriculum in the form of a Block Plan. The teacher is also asked to keep parents informed about changes that may be made in the course of the school year.

Education was understood as a work in progress. Consequently, mastery of skills does not mean perfection. Mastery is understood to mean that the student consistently uses the skill correctly or appropriately in most contexts, can understand when a teacher points out a problem, and is able to make corrections appropriately. A good benchmark for determining mastery is 80% accuracy. Mastery of a skill by 80% of students in a class may be taken as an indication that the class received appropriate introduction to the skill, although some children may need additional practice and/or remedial support to achieve automaticity. Also, there will be children whose innate gifts carry them beyond the skill level expected for each grade.

### **Perspective of Waldorf first grade teachers**

In public elementary schools, children spend a year with a teacher before moving on, whereas, in a Waldorf school the teacher ideally stays with a class from first through eighth grade. So, a first grade teacher (whether or not s/he is eventually able to stay with the class for

eight years) begins first grade with the expectation of remaining with the same class until these 6 year-olds become 14 year-olds. Therefore, first-grade Waldorf teachers dedicate a significant amount of time to getting acquainted with each student. As will become clear from interviews discussed below, such relationships are a cornerstone of the Waldorf educational experience.

During interviews, teachers emphasized the social-emotional dimension of learning, as well as the importance of taking the time to develop relationships. Teachers used the theme of relationship-building, not only in referring to the connection between the child and the teacher, but also when referring to relationships among students in the class, between teachers and parents, and between individual students and the academic curriculum. One teacher used the friendships among students in the class as a metaphor for how the letters of the alphabet come together to form words:

The students need to understand that the individual letters come together and create something new. Each letter has its own individuality, but the letters also become something new when they work together.

First-grade literacy goals included recognizing, replicating and associating sounds with the letters of the alphabet, a process that is common across nearly all schools. Yet, rather than depend on worksheets and spelling tests, Waldorf teachers use story-telling to emphasize these relationships. For example, a story about a king was used to teach the sound made by the letter K. Each child drew the king in a K-shaped pose with one leg thrust forward and one arm held aloft (often holding a sword at an angle mirroring that of his leg). This image became the most significant factor in the teaching moment, leaving a visual imprint in the children's minds. To help with retention, the children's drawings were posted on the wall above the blackboard after the lesson had been taught.



Another teacher spoke of building students' relationships to the letters in ways that went beyond just saying, "This is a B and this is the sound it makes." Echoing Eisner's (2002) emphasis on how imagery solidifies memory, the teacher wanted children to experience:



the shape, the quality of the B, and seeing where that letter lives in the world: in the butterfly and the boot... relating it to the sound and the shape. Then you build a more personal relationship to the experience of learning the letters.

The teacher had children draw a picture of someone's legs, standing in the grass and wearing boots, with several butterflies flitting about. Each boot represented the lower-case b, while each of the butterfly's wings represented a capital letter B. This teacher also enlarged on that theme, explaining that focusing on the relationship between the letters and what children already know and understand could be understood as "creating a feeling of warmth. When [the letters] are alive and vibrant and *purposeful*, the students develop a love for learning and an interest in what they are doing."



Not all children produced realistic drawings, but teachers emphasized the importance of being able to "see a child's strengths," "being aware of their struggles," and "meeting them where they are." No grades are given in Waldorf schools. All three teachers spoke repeatedly about creating an atmosphere in which students felt "safe to be and to express and to try and to fail." They wanted to help children make connections through the act of drawing. One teacher spoke of the value of reaching out to children "through their imaginative life, helping them find relevance and [a] relationship to academic experiences... ." Another teacher explained: "The letters must come alive. They have to experience them in their body, their hands and their memory." This recalls Steiner's (1996) descriptions of the "living pictures" created in a child's imagination and the memorable mental constructs drawn from them.

### **The goals of Waldorf first grade teachers**

The goals mentioned by the first-grade teachers included: a) forming a deep understanding of each student; b) helping students to "believe in themselves"; and c) helping children build personal connections to what they were learning. These practices grew out of a holistic perspective on learning. The teachers believed that developing strong relationships with their students enabled them to build a foundation for reading comprehension that would lead to deeper understanding of—and appreciation for—the content students would read in later years (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, 2019). This also harked back to Steiner's (1954) observation that children must be given mobile concepts whose form is capable of changing as the child matures.

In first grade Waldorf classrooms, lessons center around a daily story chosen by the teacher to arouse student interest. Many lessons end with artistic activities designed to help students visualize and remember key concepts. This focus on visual images and on drawing as an aid to memory has commonalities with Elliot Eisner's argument, in *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), that images formed in the mind tend to be evanescent unless stabilized, via

inscription in lasting materials through art or writing. Pre-literate children, unable to make use of written language, are seen as benefiting from being able to use artistic means both to represent and to recall what they have learned.

Steiner believed that young, pre-literate children experience their mental world in pictures rather than words (Göttgens, 2011). He saw fostering a child's ability to mentally visualize a story through drawing as having an essential role in building the child's capacity to make meaning through words. In the classroom, Waldorf teachers tell vivid, descriptive stories that expose children to rich vocabulary and resonate with their feelings. The goal is to increase the likelihood that the tale (and the drawing associated with it) will be remembered and integrated with other learning (Friedlaender et al., 2015).

### **A year in a Waldorf first grade classroom**

The first-grade language arts curriculum is built on nature stories and culturally relevant fairy tales. Visual arts play an important pedagogical role. As children enter the classroom in the morning, a vivid chalk drawing on the blackboard gives them a preview of the main lesson and provides a memorable image that will help with recall.<sup>1</sup> Before long, first graders realize that the chalk drawing has one or more letters of the alphabet playfully embedded in it. They try to identify the letter(s): M may be represented by two mountain peaks, W by wind driven waves, or S by a salamander. Nor are the letters always pictured the same way. Specific choices are left up to the individual teacher, who will be best able to anticipate the needs of the class. After the story is told and sounds made by the target letters are discussed, children copy the drawing in their main lesson book, which becomes a portfolio of their work. The drawing process encourages an active, imaginative relationship with the letters and their sounds.

Waldorf teachers also use art activities to encourage children's development of habits of mind, such as becoming more observant, engaged and persistent as they work on their drawings, as well as more reflective about the final product. Even though the first Waldorf school opened in Germany over a century ago, the art integration aspect of the curriculum has commonalities with the Studio Thinking Framework, developed by researchers associated with Harvard Project Zero. Over time, children gradually learn how to interpret ideas expressed in visual form, how to be attentive to the task at hand, and how to learn from mistakes (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007).

As the school year progresses, students learn the sounds for all 21 consonants. Also, they begin working on the vowels (which the teachers referred to as "singing" letters, since only the vowels can be elongated and sung with a fully open throat); the students are given poems that emphasize these sounds. Choral recitation of poems forms another key part of the curriculum. Children learn many poems by heart. Then, one day, the teacher writes a familiar poem on the board and asks the children to copy it into their main lesson books. Since the children know the words of the poem, they begin to make connections among the letters they are copying and the sound of words in the poem. Spontaneously, they begin to "read" the words.

Once the children know the sounds of all the individual letters, the teacher focuses on digraphs like *th*, *sh* and *ph*, as well as word families such as *at*, *cat* and *hat*. Yet, the structure of

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of drawings: <https://www.chalkboarddrawing.org/bottles>

individual lessons remains much the same. The teacher writes a poem—or part of a story that the children already know—on the board. As children excitedly recognize sounds and words, they begin to “read” the poem. Finally, the children write the poem in their main lesson books. By the end of the year, children will have acquired considerable phonemic awareness through daily practice. They will have begun, on their own, to decode words.

Until first grade, the children learned about the world through their own observations and through other people. When interacting with others, the children saw their faces, heard their tone of voice, took in their body language and attitude. Now, as each child begins to read, communication becomes detached from another person’s presence. The child’s eyes take in lines of black shapes on the page. Then, suddenly, another person’s thoughts are revealed to the child (!) (Göttgens, 2011). A miracle of sorts takes place. Before long, children are able to use the newly learned letters to begin putting their own thoughts down on paper by using invented spelling. As a result of this journey of discovery, the children have built a relationship to letters of the alphabet.

### **Limitations**

There is much that is attractive about the child-centered pedagogy of Waldorf schools. Teachers recalled hearing parents say they wished they had the opportunity to go to a Waldorf school when they were young. However, these were parents who had chosen to send their child(ren) to a Waldorf school and who were willing to go along with aspects of the Waldorf philosophy such as limiting television-watching at home. Although scholarships were available, the parents at independent Waldorf schools in U.S. tend to be fairly affluent. Since the first-grade teachers expected to stay with their class through eighth grade, they may have been willing to put a stronger focus on relationship-building than teachers who knew that they would be greeting a new group of students each fall. This focus on relationships helped to shape the school culture. Therefore, the findings of this study should not be generalized to other populations.

### **Discussion**

The Waldorf curriculum has been said to be “unique in its comprehensive nature, with its explicit theory of child development, curriculum, pedagogical approach and philosophy about the role of the teacher” (Friedlaender, Beckham, Zheng, & Darling-Hammond, 2015, p.99). There are now over 1,090 Waldorf schools in 64 nations (Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, n/a), which has increased variation in the folk stories told and the historical events studied in different geographic areas. Still, in our technological age, visiting a Waldorf elementary school can feel like a visit to another era, with no television or computers screens in sight. Yet, as a *New York Times* article surprisingly noted in regard to a Silicon Valley Waldorf school:

The chief technology officer of eBay sends his children to a nine-classroom school here. So do employees of Silicon Valley giants like Google, Apple, Yahoo and Hewlett-Packard (Richtel, 2011).

What is the attraction for parents immersed in such high-tech enterprises? An article by Barbara Sokolov (2000), a former public-school teacher who sent her own children to a Waldorf school, provides insight. She points out that there is more to reading than the mechanical external activity of recognizing configurations of letters on a page and decoding the symbols that stand for sounds and words. The problem is that the process, referred to as

*reading readiness*, is dry and abstract, clashing with the natural inclinations of small children. Also, once they begin to read, most children are given simplistic texts that correspond to the level of their decoding abilities. As a result, there is little to ignite a child's imagination, to evoke wonder or to stimulate appreciation for the beauty and complexity of language.

Recalling her experience as a fifth and sixth grade teacher, Sokolov (2000) describes the struggles of many children who had difficulty understanding or remembering what they read. They were decoding but not comprehending. She contrasts their frustration with the joyful experience of young children in Waldorf schools who learn to "live into the story," forming imaginative inner pictures, at first in response to the cues supplied by chalkboard pictures, then in response to the stories told by their teacher. As the children learned to read, their mental pictures gave meaning to the words on the page. Children who had learned to love listening to stories and enjoy living in the visual realm of imagination did this naturally.

For children in a Waldorf first-grade classroom, the experience of listening to stories became an inner journey of exploration—as Rudolf Steiner intended. Visualization evokes feelings that make a narrative more memorable. Discussions spring naturally from children's vicarious experiences, while listening to a story, helping them to master demanding verbal and cognitive skills. Aesthetic and linguistic means of comprehension interact in such a way as to provide a more inclusive picture of the world.

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