

Academic Rickets: Why Waldorf Education Should be Balanced, Not Enlivened

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Nicholas was a Steiner-Waldorf student in middle school who was not completing his homework. I was hired to determine why not.

A battery of assessments revealed the problem. Nicholas's academic application was in the high school range: he was able to solve math story problems intended for high school students. However, Nicholas's academic fluency was in the early elementary school range: he could not complete a page of simple addition and subtraction facts intended for first- and second-grade students in the time allotted by the assessment. Further assessment revealed that Nicholas's performance was similarly lopsided in reading and writing skills.

Nicholas was not able to complete his homework because he had a severe imbalance between his academic application (i.e., his ability to apply academic skills such as solve story problems in math) and his academic fluency (i.e., his automaticity at basic academic skills such as mastery of math facts). His education had given him a severe case of academic rickets.

What is Academic Rickets?

Academic rickets is an imbalance that shows up in students when education becomes too enlivening.

The term is based on an indication Rudolf Steiner gives Waldorf teachers in *Practical Advice to Teachers*. Steiner stresses the need for balance in education and warns Waldorf teachers:

“We . . . [feel] in ourselves the urge to enliven what is dying in concepts through . . . pictorial imagination. If you wish to be true educators, you must be on your guard against making everything abstractly uniform. Do not allow yourselves to say that we should not develop the death processes in the human being—that we should avoid training the conceptual realm of ideas in the children. This mistake . . . Is like that of a doctor who . . . then announces, as though he is a great teacher, that bones are a dying part of human beings. Therefore, he says, let us guard people against this dying element by keeping the bones soft and lively. If physicians acted on such an opinion, it would lead to a world of rickety people unable to fulfill their tasks.” (Steiner 2000, 32-33)

In other words, education should contain a healthy balance of enlivening processes (e.g., pictorial imagination) and dead structuring processes. It is foolish to want to make education uniformly enlivening. Let's consider Steiner's rickets simile to see why this is so.

Rickets is a bone disease caused by a dietary imbalance (i.e., insufficient vitamin D). It makes the dead part of the human being soft and lively. For example, it can cause the legs to bow, as shown in the figure below. The bones literally do not support the human being.

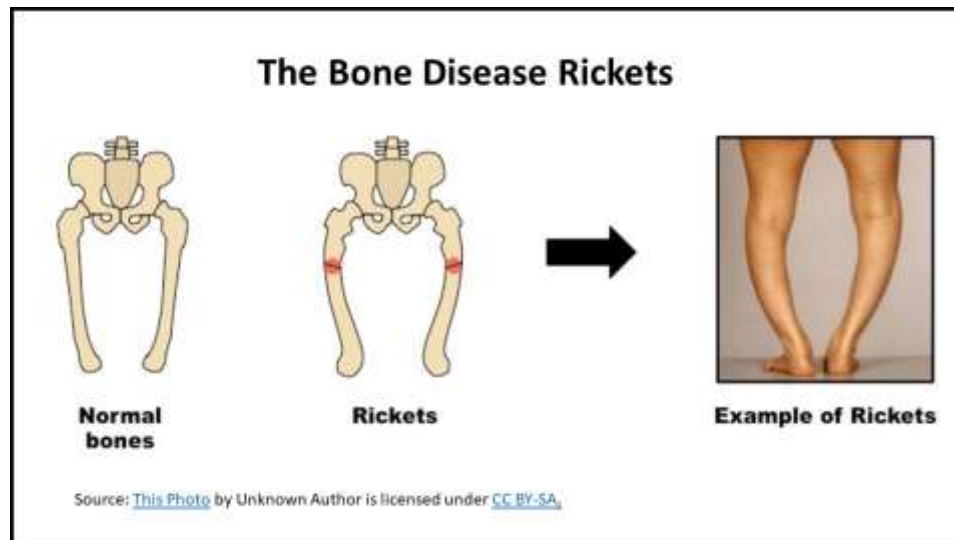


Figure 1: The Bone Disease Rickets

Students develop academic rickets when they receive insufficient structuring elements. Their education does not support them. They struggle to complete their work, like Nicholas.

How to Prevent Academic Rickets

The key to preventing academic rickets is to bring the dead structuring elements. Steiner explains how to do so in a healthy way. Steiner tells Waldorf teachers that they must balance the enlivening processes and the dead structuring processes. He reminds teachers that “unity does not arise by extinguishing one element, but by developing both sides” (2000, 33).

Therefore, Waldorf teachers should include both enlivening elements and structuring elements in their lessons. Including too many enlivening elements (e.g., imagination, art, and games) is just as unhealthy as including too many dead structuring elements (e.g., rote practice, worksheets, and assessments).

To prevent academic rickets in Waldorf students, do the following:

1. Bring rote practice, worksheets, and assessment to balance the imagination, art, and games.
2. Do formal assessments of students’ academic skills and capacities three times a year to see if students are mastering what you have taught. Include fluency testing.
3. Use the assessment results to correct imbalances in academic skills, application, and fluency when they first appear, rather than waiting until a student has developed a full-blown case of academic rickets, as happened to Nicholas.

How to Treat Academic Rickets

When I shared the results of the assessment with Nicholas's Steiner-Waldorf teacher, she asked, "So I should give Nicholas less homework?"

I corrected her: "No, you should give Nicholas different homework. He needs rote practice in the basic academic skills that he should have mastered in grades 1–3, including math facts."

Why Is Steiner's Indication So Hard to Hear?

Steiner's indication is hard for Waldorf teachers to hear for several reasons.

First, Steiner tells Waldorf teachers they would have a difficult time with this indication. By way of conclusion to his rickets simile, Steiner says, "Unity does not arise by extinguishing one element, but by developing both sides. People today cannot yet think in this way about unity" (Steiner 2000, 33). Waldorf teachers tend to overvalue the enlivening processes (i.e., Luciferic pole) and denigrate the dead structuring processes (i.e., Ahrimanic pole). However, both processes are equally important if humans are to be healthy and education is to be effective.

Second, Steiner perpetuates the notion that the enlivening elements are more important than dead structuring elements. He speaks about the need to enliven education on multiple occasions in his lectures but does not give equal time to the dead structuring elements.

Steiner's original indication is needed: *Waldorf teachers should value both enlivening and structuring processes and create a healthy balance in education.* The following wood carving "The Representative of Humanity between Lucifer and Ahriman" can illustrate the concept:



Figure 2: "The Representative of Humanity between Lucifer and Ahriman," wood carving designed by Rudolf Steiner

Above is Lucifer, a being who brings enthusiasm and enlivening forces (spiritual stream). Below is Ahriman, a being who brings the dead structuring elements (materialism). The representative of humanity stands between. The goal of humanity is not to value one extreme over the other but to find a balance between the two poles. The same holds true of education. Teachers should find the middle way between enlivening and structuring processes.

Conclusion

Nicholas's case is an extreme version of academic rickets, but it is not an isolated incident. In the past 18 years, I have assessed and taught numerous Steiner-Waldorf students whose IQs were above average but who required remedial education because they struggled with fluency and had difficulty with their schoolwork. Despite intervention, some of these students suffered permanent damage: they struggled to achieve success commensurate with their potential, and they struggled to take their places in life.

I promised several Steiner-Waldorf families I would do something about this problem. I co-authored a book to improve literacy instruction in Steiner-Waldorf schools: *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3* (Langley and Militzer-Kopperl 2018). *Roadmap* contains a balance between the enlivening elements (e.g., pictorial imagination) and the dead structuring elements (e.g., rote practice and assessment). I designed the program to get up to 95% of Steiner-Waldorf students reading at grade level, the same as the best public schools.

Post-publication, *The Roadmap to Literacy* was co-opted by people who do not understand it and who are enthralled with enlivening education. They unbalanced the program by removing key structuring elements and adding more enlivening elements, thus weakened its efficacy. To date, these people refuse to grant audience so I can share my concerns about their misuse of my work. Therefore, I wrote a new edition *The Roadmap to Literacy: Renewal of Literacy® Edition* (Militzer-Kopperl 2022) and created support courses and mentoring to help teachers get on track.



Figure 3: New Edition of *The Roadmap to Literacy*, support courses, and mentoring
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I also take this message to the wider Waldorf world:

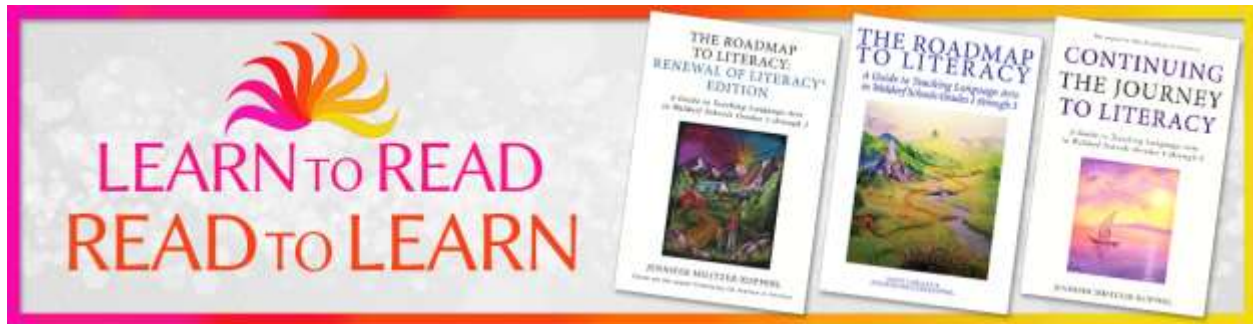
Steiner-Waldorf teachers, the goal is not to enliven education but to balance education. Rote practice, worksheets, and assessments are every bit as important as creativity, art, and pictorial imagination. If you downplay the dead structuring elements, you put your students at risk of developing academic rickets. Do not do so in the name of my book.

I wrote The Roadmap to Literacy to end academic rickets and get up to 95% of Steiner-Waldorf students reading and spelling at grade level by the end of third grade, the same as the best public schools. I did so by including the dead structuring elements in order to balance the creative enlivening elements inherent in Steiner-Waldorf education. When you omit dead structuring elements from the program, the program you teach is no longer The Roadmap to Literacy.

Steiner is right: Unity is achieved not by negating structuring elements but by including both enlivening elements and structuring elements. The goal is not enlivening education but balance in education.

Please join me in renewing literacy—for the twenty-first century and beyond.

Jennifer Miltzer-Kopperl is the creator of Renewal of Literacy® and author of *The Roadmap to Literacy Books*. She brings the best of Steiner’s indications together with the best of modern research to renew Steiner-Waldorf education, starting with a renewal of literacy.



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