

## Waldorf, Montessori programs are about teaching children how to think

**Both approaches were crafted early in the past century. Adherents say they have stood the test of time, laying strong foundations for young students in a more thorough, 'whole brain' way**

Cathryn Atkinson

Sept. 16, 2009 01:38 PM EDT

Private education in Canada offers a bewildering array of teaching models, with religious schools, home schooling, traditional, sports and arts academies, and even language immersion programs still considered beyond the norm exemplified by most public schools.



Sumin Kang is a Grade 3 student at the Vancouver Waldorf School.

### More Private Schools Reports

- [Prodigies need educating, too](#)
- [The boys are all right](#)
- [Where the boys aren't](#)
- [Nothing like your granddad's school days](#)
- [Be a savvy shopper before you buy](#)
- [That private school look](#)
- [Special schools for special needs](#)
- [Boys and girls, separate but equal](#)
- [Good-faith efforts](#)
- [Soothing the pain of sticker shock](#)
- [Think global, teach local](#)
- [Socrates would approve](#)
- [Program opens doors to low-income families](#)
- [The little French-immersion school that could ... and did](#)
- ['We're saving them from being bored'](#)
- [Tips on picking the right fit](#)
- [A private school primer](#)
- [Independence at an early age](#)
- [Reading, writing, networking](#)
- [Private school primer: what to ask, what to know, and how to decide](#)
- [Classroom cultures](#)
- [An insider's advice](#)
- [It's business as usual ... for now at least](#)
- [Why single-sex schooling has a global appeal](#)
- [Our guide to private schools](#)

But Montessori and Waldorf education programs seem to head the list of alternative educational options offered to parents, despite both systems being about a century old.

Their supporters, however, say both offer child-centred education philosophies that are growing in popularity. What's more, they say, the schools are producing happier, more academically successful pupils.

The differences between Montessori and Waldorf are in the details.

The Waldorf education program was developed by Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, who wrote *The Education of The Child* in 1907. He opened the first school based on his principles in 1919 to serve the children of cigar factory employees in Stuttgart, Germany.

Ryan Lindsay, the president of The Waldorf Association of Ontario, says the key stratagem behind a Waldorf education is providing "the right thing at the right time" in a child's curriculum.

Mr. Lindsay is critical of the tendency to intellectualize children at an earlier age, saying it emphasizes academic development over physical, social, emotional and creative development. Arts and environmental studies are compulsory throughout a pupil's academic career at Waldorf schools, and Mr. Lindsay says such an approach develops a well-rounded person.

"We make sure we focus on teaching children how to think and not what to think. We like to think we are laying the foundation in a more thorough way so that when children get to a certain age the approach aids their intellectual development," he says.

Mary Paradis, the director of development at the Vancouver Waldorf School, says she was once one of those parents who selected the school through a combination of research and intuition about what Waldorf could do for her youngsters.

The school, founded in 1971, offers a preschool to Grade 12 program and currently has 300 students on two campuses in North Vancouver. Ms. Paradis, who grew up in a family of teachers, came to love the program so much that she sought employment with the school.

"We had moved to Vancouver and I was one of those parents looking for an alternative education," she recalls. "I was blown away by what they do. Looking at my own children I thought there was more out there for them. And the result is they are both very excited about school, they love learning and they are inspired."

Ms. Paradis says the Waldorf aim is a "whole brain approach," with most schools emphasizing a left-brain approach (logical, sequential, rational, analytical and objective) at the expense of the right side of the brain (intuitive, holistic, synthesizing and subjective). All elements are important in Waldorf.

"The social, emotional and spiritual are part of a child's connection with the world. All our children do movement, visual and drama, along with algebra and everything else," she said.

Like Waldorf, the Montessori system of education has its germination in the early decades of the past century.

Montessori was founded by Italy's first female physician, Maria Montessori, in 1907, after she became concerned by the educational neglect of special needs children. Her first pupils, eight-year-olds considered "defective" by the Italian state, not only passed their national literacy exams, but also scored higher than average in reading and writing.

Nancy Lowden, who founded the Montessori School of Calgary in 1983, met the granddaughter of the founder in Toronto in 1971.

"I was at McGill University and back in Toronto for a job interview. Renilde Montessori was in Toronto for several years setting up a school and I visited. At the time I really didn't know who she was. She invited me to watch the children in the classroom and asked me what I saw. I told her I didn't know what I was looking at," she recalls.

Ms. Lowden said the children were all focused on a task, happy, quiet, "and obviously learning." The experience

brought her into the program as her career, and she set up her own school upon moving to Calgary.

"I wanted my own children to have the experience," she says.

"We offer an orderly and predicable environment to provide support. When learning something new, a child is led through a series of steps, from initial steps to mastery."

Katherine Poyntz, the executive director of the Canadian Council of Montessori Administrators, says that, while there was a wide discrepancy in how schools adhering to the Montessori name are run, her organization was founded in 1978 to enforce high standards and offer advice to parents and educators on best practices.

"The [Montessori] character in all the schools, what they have in common, is that three-year, multiage group. Each Montessori classroom is a community," she says. "Lessons are geared towards a child's learning and not a teacher's teaching. Children are encouraged to explore, to take responsibility."

Mr. Lindsay says there are fewer Waldorf schools in Canada compared with Montessori Schools. This, he said, is due to prospective Waldorf schools needing to gain accreditation and adhering to strict Waldorf guidelines. In contrast, the Montessori name is not trademarked and it is easier for new schools to adopt the name.

"It means parents need to do more research when looking at Montessori compared with Waldorf," he said.

*Special to The Globe and Mail*

---

## **THE EDUCATIONAL MODELS**

### **Waldorf**

There are approximately 2,500 Waldorf schools around the world.

Educational practices include:

- Early education is built around learning through the senses and experiences with practical activities.
- Reading is started around the age of 7.
- Exposure to computers, television and recorded music is discouraged in the early years.
- The elementary school years are considered a time to develop emotional and artistic intelligence.
- For teenage students, there is a greater emphasis on abstract thought and social responsibility.

### **Montessori**

There are roughly 22,000 Montessori schools around the world.

Educational practices include:

- Children are taught in three-year age groups: Birth to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 9, 9 to 12, and 12 to 15.
- Children are seen as capable of being responsible for their choices and encouraged to make decisions.
- The child is closely observed while carrying out exercises to ensure the best ongoing curriculum development for their abilities.
- Materials and activities challenge the senses with a hands-on approach and are used in a way that allows children to practice, repeat and self-correct before moving on in the program.
- The classroom environment is built to a child-size scale.