

# Balancing the Four Polarities: Case Studies of Waldorf Children and Anthroposophical Therapies A project sponsored by the Waldorf Education Research Institute *Dorit Winter*

## **Introduction**

In his educational lectures, Rudolf Steiner described four polarities as ways to view and understand the developing child. In *Balance in Teaching*, he described children whose egos are incarnated either too loosely or too deeply; in *Education for Adolescence*, he spoke about cosmic and earthly children and about children who are either rich or poor in imagination and memory, and in *Faculty Meetings*, he described large- and small-headed children.

Each of these polarities is a way of considering and assessing one member of the fourfold human being. The overly loose or deep incarnation of the ego clearly relates to the ego organization. The polarity of richness or poverty of imagination or memory primarily concerns the astral organization. The cosmic-earthly polarity refers to the predominance of the Individuality's pre-earthly being vs. telluric influences (including heredity) in the formation of the etheric body. The polarity of large- vs. small-headedness has to do with mineral, lifeless substances, i.e., that which returns to dust at the end of one's earthly life—the physical body.

Rudolf Steiner's elucidation of these polarities holds great potential for helping teachers and therapists serve the needs of incarnating human beings. Helping children balance these four polarities can improve life-long health and vigor on all levels—in body, soul, and spirit.

## **The Research Project**

Four child development professionals—two pedagogues, a physician, and a therapeutic eurythmist—will collaborate to study the anthroposophical approach to children's needs in relationship to these four polarities. They will meet regularly to work on developing an understanding of the four polarities as expressed through the children selected for this study, and they will formulate pedagogical and therapeutic strategies to work with these children. They intend to follow the children as long as possible, perhaps through the eight years of elementary school.

## **Background**

While many positive benefits of Waldorf education have received wide recognition, the probable physical health benefits remain largely undocumented, partly due to the considerable effort necessary to obtain long-term observations of human health, but perhaps also due to the need to implement more fully the means Rudolf Steiner initiated for balancing the four polarities. The two comparative medical studies published to date found evidence of greater health in Waldorf pupils compared with pupils at neighboring public schools: Matthiolius found menarche (onset of menstruation) occurred on average one year later in Waldorf pupils<sup>1</sup>, and Alm, et al documented lower rates of atopic conditions.<sup>2</sup>

There has not been much consideration of the four polarities in anthroposophical writings addressing the recent phenomena of widespread learning difficulties, either in the pedagogical or the medical literature. One of our hypotheses is that such consideration will be helpful for these more recent phenomena as well.

## **History**

On October 9 and 10, 1999, a conference was held in San Francisco under the auspices of the San Francisco Waldorf Teacher Training on the theme of the four polarities described by Rudolf Steiner. The four co-carriers of the conference were **Dorit Winter**, Director of the San Francisco Waldorf Teacher Training; **David Weber**, class teacher at the San Francisco Waldorf School; **Maria Helland-Hansen**, therapeutic eurythmist at the San Francisco Waldorf School; and **Bob Dudney**, M.D., anthroposophical physician.

The conference, which is reported in the January, 2000 *WERI Research Bulletin*, generated interest and enthusiasm among the 40 or so participants. After the conference, the carrying group realized that it was in an ideal position to carry on a long-range study of individual children. David Weber would be the next first grade teacher at the San Francisco Waldorf School; Maria Helland-Hansen was already working closely with several families of children who would be in David's class and is particularly interested in the study of the four polarities; Dr. Dudney had been consulted by teachers at the San Francisco Waldorf School and had already been working with individual children and their parents, and Dorit Winter could offer continuing support, initiative, and direction. In addition, **Amie Wong** would join the group as archivist, secretary and research assistant. Thus arose the idea for a formal study of these four polarities and ways of helping the child find balance through pedagogical and therapeutic/medical measures.

Under the auspices of the San Francisco Waldorf Teacher Training of Rudolf Steiner College, the research team held its second annual conference, October 7 & 8, 2000 at the San Francisco Waldorf School, on the subject of the Archetypal Polarities. Physicians, therapists and teachers from the Greater Bay Area attended. Case studies were presented of three children from three different schools. Conference participants agreed that next year's conference will benefit from the research which the WERI Project team anticipates doing together during the coming year.

## **Methodology**

The class teacher, in consultation with the therapists, will determine which children should be included in the study. Parent enthusiasm for the study will be essential. The physician and the collaborating pedagogues will each observe the children at least once a month in the classroom and during other school activities. In addition to her work with individual study children, the therapeutic eurythmist will be teaching the pedagogical eurythmy lessons for the first grade, and will also observe during other subjects as needed. The physician will regularly assess individual study children and prescribe anthroposophical treatments as appropriate.

By means of frequent and on-going conversations, the class teacher, therapeutic eurythmist, physician and research project coordinator will follow the development and progress of the study children. The faculty of the San Francisco Waldorf School will be kept informed of the ongoing research and it is likely that this awareness will enrich the quality of classroom work and child studies undertaken by the faculty as a whole.

Careful notes will be taken about each case. The project secretary will keep documentation updated and clearly organized. All remedies, both pedagogical and therapeutic/medical, will be charted.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthiolius, H., "Basic Elements of the School Physician's Activity," in Husemann and Wolff, ed., *The Anthroposophical Approach to Medicine*, vol. 1, Anthroposophic Press, 1982, pp. 103-105.

<sup>2</sup> Alm, Johan S., et al, "Atopy in children of Families with an Anthroposophic Lifestyle," in *The Lancet*, May 1, 1999.