

Did Rudolf Steiner Want a Seven-Grade Elementary School Configuration?

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This article examines the question: Was the original eight-grade sequence in the Waldorf elementary schools the result of a necessary compromise Rudolf Steiner made? This question grows in importance because some Waldorf educators have been reconsidering the effectiveness of having a class teacher for eight years. In Switzerland, for instance, Waldorf schools have considered changing to a seven-year sequence because of the difficulties teachers have had growing with their class.

In Waldorf education, the teacher and students build a profound heart-to-heart relationship over the course of eight years. The advantages of such a deep and meaningful growing together become apparent to anyone who has experienced it, or its opposite for that matter. It has always been fascinating to me to hear veteran Waldorf teachers speak about how they had to meet the challenges of learning so many subjects and growing with their class. Some Waldorf teachers felt inadequate in the face of these challenges because they did not have the necessary background, skill, or support to grow with a class except for a limited number of grades. Should Waldorf class teachers teach the entire span of elementary grades? Was that span intended to be seven rather than eight years? In this article I do not attempt to arrive at final answers to these questions, but I hope to prompt further discussion regarding what is in the best interest of Waldorf students and their teachers.

Seven-year Cycles as the Basis of Waldorf Education

The basis of Waldorf education was given in several lectures by Rudolf Steiner in 1906-1907, later published as an essay, *The Education of the Child in Light of Anthroposophy*. In this essay, Steiner outlines the unfolding of the physical, etheric, and astral bodies. This process takes place in seven-year cycles, with the physical body developing between age 0 and 7, the etheric body developing between the ages of 7 and 14, and the astral developing between the ages of 14 and 21. Each of these seven-year cycles consists of the sub-cycle of $2 \frac{1}{3}$ years, which are mentioned in Steiner's later educational lectures.

The $2 \frac{1}{3}$ year sub-cycles define the changes in teaching methods in the Waldorf school. Approximately every two grades the teachers alter their pedagogical approach to match the psycho-spiritual growth of the child, e.g., languages are taught in first and second grades through imitation, in third, fourth, and fifth grades more through the element of grammar and writing, and in sixth through eighth grades with a greater focus on style.

In the first Waldorf school, Steiner altered the methods a bit in the first grade because school law required children to enter school at age six instead of seven. While the methods may have been changed, I believe that the curriculum suggestions for the first grade are what Steiner originally intended, not adapted for six-year old (premature) first graders. I make this point only to make the reader aware things were not so simple in the beginning of the school movement. Even today some schools do not use the second dentition as prerequisite for entrance into the first grade.

School law in 1919

In most Central European schools, elementary school, or Volksschule, lasted for seven years with other types of training. After leaving school, some students became apprentices, others went to technical or vocational schools, and some went to Gymnasium for a classical education in preparation for university entrance. In Stuttgart Baden-Württemberg in 1919, all schools were required to have an eight-grade elementary school sequence, and the new Waldorf school was no exception.

One need not be a mathematician to ask the question: How does a seven-year cycle fit into an eight-grade elementary configuration? This question has never been posed, perhaps because Rudolf Steiner stated that compromises needed to be made:

If one has an eye on human health and human development, then this makes possible correct classroom and educational practice.... The Waldorf school is, in many aspects, completely built on compromises; this fact we do not want to deny; however, only as it is possible today, do we educate and teach in the sense of a true knowledge of the human being. (GA 303, p. 153, my translation)

Steiner's use of the term "a true knowledge of the human being" could perhaps indicate the fact that each human being goes through seven-year cycles and therefore not an eight-year cycle.

Seven-Year Cycles and The "Ideal School"

Steiner rarely discussed the ideal school or the ideal curriculum. In *Practical Advice to Teachers*, he said:

This much I must tell you before I will construct for you the **ideal** curriculum; and then I will proceed to compare this ideal curriculum with the curricula which will play a role in your classes because we are in fact surrounded on all sides from the outer world and its constructs. (GA 294 p. 171, *my translation*)

Because he compared the ideal with the one being put into practice, we have to question what he meant. I think a hint was given in a lecture not completely related to education:

And if, for example, more attention would be given in your teaching, to such things, then you could work, therefore, in a tremendously beneficial manner. You could work in a tremendously beneficial manner, for example, if you would divide the consecutive school grades into a **seven-grade school**, so that you create so-to-say a middle grade, which would then stand alone by itself; and that which was learned in the third grade would be repeated in fifth grade, however in a changed form; and according to the same principle what was taught in second grade would be repeated in sixth grade; and what was taught in first grade would be repeated in the seventh grade.

This configuration would achieve an excellent strengthening of the memory, and people would see that if this were put into practice, how beneficial an effect these things would have – simply because they have their origin in the laws of real life. (GA 115, p. 203, *my translation*)

In this quote Steiner outlines a configuration of seven grades, which perfectly matches the seven-year cycle. Here Steiner draws polarities between the first and seventh grades, second and sixth grades, and third and fifth grades, with the fourth grade standing by itself. This middle grade corresponds to the ego level in the seven-fold human being or to the flower in Goethe's description of the archetypal plant.¹

The fact that Steiner so rarely mentioned the ideal curriculum and that his reference to the seven-year sequence is obscure may make people question their validity. It seems to me, however that the ideal school configuration would be one in which every grade corresponded to a year in the seven-year cycle. I believe that Rudolf Steiner desired a seven-grade sequence but he had to make certain necessary compromises for the founding of the first Waldorf school. In *The Renewal of Education*, Steiner said:

It is natural that today these things can only be seen as an ideal for the future.... When there is a loop hole as in the case of the Württemberger school law, one can establish something with compromises. (GA 301, p.88, *my translation*)

There are, of course, many other compromises that the Waldorf school had to make to comply with the State's requirements, however, I have focused just on this particular one since it is so little discussed.

The Polarities in the Eight-Grade Sequence

In the quote from GA 115, Steiner outlines the polarities between pairs of grades in a school with a seven-grade sequence. The principle of polarities can also be applied, however, with an eight grade sequence. For such a sequence, Steiner worked out course selections for the first eight grades using certain organic forms based on the intervals and qualities of the four-fold human being.²

In the following quote, Steiner describes how the teacher should conceptualize the eight-grade sequence as an organic whole. This concept is especially important in cases where a class teacher has to leave a class in the middle of an eight-year cycle. The new teacher needs to be able to teach with a sense for the organic whole of the curriculum. I have rendered this quote in a poetic form due to its length.

That is why such importance is placed on the fact
that the pedagogue is master in the school
and not just that any school norms dominate
which one must adapt himself to,
but that the teacher is himself master in the school,
that he grows not only into the methods,
but that he grows with the form of the school,
that he has grown into the configuration of the first eight grades,
whether he, in one year, teaches the first or the eighth grade,
that he teaches in such a way in the first grade,
that in this way of teaching (of the first grade) the way is also given
in which the pedagogue must teach in the eighth grade.
(GA 301, p.81, *my translation*)

Here we have it: the first and eighth grades form a polarity. From there we can conclude there must also be polarities between the second and the seventh grades, between the third and the sixth grades, and between the fourth and the fifth grades. This is what Steiner meant when he said the way is given in first grade for teaching the right way in eighth grade. This teaching process could have been made even clearer if Steiner had said “What is taught in first grade should be repeated in eighth grade” as he did in his statements about the ideal seven-grade sequence.

The principle of polarity is detectable in all subjects in the Waldorf curriculum. For example, in the history curriculum, the first four years call for: Fairy Tales in first grade, animal fables in second, stories of the Hebrews (the law) in third, and Norse Myths in the fourth grade. These subjects deal respectively with the physical, etheric, astral, and ego aspects of the human being.

The four upper grades deal with the same aspects of the human being in reverse order. In the fifth grade, the great individuals of Ancient History stand as a polarity to the Norse Myths, because they both deal with the human ego. The sixth grade topic of Romans, especially Roman law, is polar to the Hebrew Law because law shapes the astral. The seventh grade topic of Age of Discovery is polar to the topic of animal fables; both are connected to the life of people/ animals or to the etheric in general. The eighth grade topic of cultural history is polar to the archetypes found in Fairy tales of the first grade, because both describe the nature of human archetype thus representing the physical body level of the curriculum. A teacher who masters such interrelationships has mastered the content, form, and organic wholeness of the entire curriculum, and is thereby able to give the children the sense that all the subjects are interconnected and taught for a purpose.

Whether or not Rudolf Steiner wanted the elementary school sequence to be based on the seven-year rhythm I will leave up to the reader. I do not think instituting such a sequence today would have a significant impact on the day-to-day activities of schools. What is more pertinent is whether Waldorf teachers are conscious of the particular form of the sequence of the curriculum and whether they are teaching out this type of organic understanding. Other questions that might be raised are: Should some Waldorf teachers become specialists? Should they focus on first through fourth grades, while others who enjoy teaching the older children, could work with the higher elementary school grades? Waldorf education is not only about educating but about “awakening” the children. If a teacher does not possess the powers of awakening a certain age group, should one not accept that and instead work with the principle of specialization?

The eight-grade sequence is not a natural one. I believe that it has been a necessary arrangement that may no longer be in the interest of the teacher, and thus not in the interest of the students.

¹ See Florin Lowndes’s *The Enlivening of the Chakra of the Heart*, Anthroposophical Press, for a more detailed account of Steiner’s use of the seven-fold human being as a model for meditation or writing. See also, Mark Riccio’s *An Outline for a Renewal of Waldorf Education*, Mercury Press June 2001.

² See *Theosophy* or *An Outline of Esoteric Science* for a full description.

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