

Phases and Transitions in Waldorf Education

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For Waldorf teachers, parents, and students, the question can easily arise: Why does the class teacher period last eight years? Waldorf education is based upon an understanding of child development in seven-year phases. The class teacher who takes a class for eight years remains with his or her students longer than a single developmental phase. This practice seems to be inconsistent with the principles of a developmentally-based education and also presents imposing academic, social, and practical challenges to all concerned.

When the first Waldorf School was founded in 1919, one traditional educational model in Central Europe consisted of the eight-year primary school, where the teacher remained with the same group throughout the eight years. To what extent the Waldorf School owes its eight-year class teacher period to Steiner's familiarity with this system is an interesting historical question.¹ For the majority of the children in such a school, this eight years would have been the whole of their general schooling; work apprenticeships, trade school, or work on the home farm would have followed. In both Europe and America, this situation has changed radically with the introduction of universal general education up to the age of sixteen and an extremely high rate of school attendance up to the age of eighteen years of age.

For fundamental structural, practical and historical reasons, a reassessment of the class teacher period seems overdue. Questions must be asked afresh: How would a class teacher period naturally and appropriately be related to the child's development? How would the last of these eight years best be shaped to provide a coherent transition to the high school? In order to answer these questions, we must gain clarity regarding the present interrelationship of the class teacher years and the phases of child development.

Stages of Child Development

The phases of life are often dated beginning with the moment of birth, but this is a simplification, because the development of the physical body begins at conception. This fact is revealed shortly after the end of the pre-natal period, when the head has already achieved a substantial part of its final size and the sense organs and nervous system are already fairly mature. While a nine-month difference may not appear particularly significant for later phases of life, it must be taken into account in childhood. In Rudolf Steiner's lectures on human development, the phrase "from birth" is often followed by a correction such as "or rather, from conception" or "more precisely, from the moment of conception."

Since the first seven-year developmental period begins at conception, it concludes about six years and three months after birth. At about this time, the life organization begins to develop independently of both the physical organization and the outer environment. This development is signaled in various ways. For example, the change of teeth, emphasized by Steiner as a sign of this transition, begins at about age six and continues until the arrival of the twelfth-year molars, i.e. throughout the next seven years. Thus the change of teeth should be associated with the whole of the second developmental phase and not with the conclusion of the first phase, as has sometimes been asserted. Other changes in the beginning of the second phase include changes in the bodily form, especially a lengthening of the trunk, changes in the breathing and circulation,

and the development of the capacity to initiate and sustain activity independent of an imitative context.

The second developmental period also lasts seven years. At about age thirteen—i.e. fourteen years after conception—the first signs of puberty normally appear, marking the onset of the next phase of development. These signs are now increasingly apparent at earlier ages in modern, highly-developed, technologically-oriented cultures. Though common, this phenomenon is not normal. We will return to the details of this change later, for it is somewhat more complex than that taking place in the six-to-seven-year-old child.

With this chronology clear, we can compare the class teacher period to the phases of development. The class teacher period normally begins when the child is between six-and-a-half and seven. This age varies somewhat from school to school and depends on the individual child's overall development. On average, the class teacher period therefore begins almost a year into the child's second phase of development. Previous to this time, most children are still in kindergarten.

By the beginning of the seventh grade, many children are already 13 and will have begun their third developmental phase; in the course of seventh grade the rest of the children will enter this phase. Thus, seventh grade (largely) and eighth grade (completely) must be regarded as belonging to the third developmental phase. The last year of kindergarten and the last two years of the class teacher period overlap the preceding and succeeding phases of development, the former for one and the latter for two years.

<i>Life phase</i>	<i>Development of</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>School level</i>
1 st	Physical body	Conception to 4 years + 4 years + to 6 years +	At home Early years (Kindergarten)
2 nd	Life and rhythmic organization	6 years + to 7 years + 7 years + to 13 years +	Last year of Kindergarten Grades 1-6, Primary
3 rd	Sentient organization	13 years + to 15 years + 15 years + to 20 years +	Grades 7-8, Middle Grades 9-12(13), Secondary

Working with Students in the Transitional Years

Do the last year of kindergarten and the last two years of the class teaching period have a fundamentally different character than the preceding years? Do they have a distinct character of leading into the years that follow them? Do they prepare for a new developmental phase to which, in a certain sense, they already belong?

Practically speaking, the answer to all of these questions is “Yes.” During the last year of kindergarten, the child is looking forward to and preparing for the entry into elementary school. New and more challenging projects must be offered and a considerable degree of autonomy granted to six-year-olds if the kindergarten is to meet their needs. Many kindergarten teachers question whether or how such children can be successfully integrated into the home-like atmosphere appropriate to the earlier kindergarten years because the older children have such different needs from the younger.

Similarly, the seventh and eighth grade child is beginning to prepare for a new stage of life and no longer lives in the mood of young childhood. Self-assertion or a withdrawal from the social sphere is common, and a greater capacity for judgment, criticism, and antipathy become evident. These are all characteristics of the third phase of life.

The first year of the second seven-year phase of development and the first two years of the next phase have a unique, transitional character. While preparing the new phase of development, they recapitulate the preceding phase(s) of development. This phenomenon requires some explanation.

The sixth to seventh year after birth—the first year of the life or formative organization’s development—is devoted to anchoring the newly-developing life organization in the physical body. This results in substantial reorganization of the physical body itself so that it can support the developing independent life organization. Only after this recapitulatory year can the life organization actually begin to develop fully-independently of the physical body. Its forces are then liberated for memory and for the image-based thinking characteristic of this next phase of life.

A similar situation exists for the thirteen- and fourteen-year-old child. The first year of the sentient organization’s development—which normally occurs in the seventh grade—is devoted to a reorganization of the physical body so that it may support the developing independent sentient organization. This reorganization shows itself, for example, in the growth of the limbs, changes in the larynx resulting in the change of voice, especially for the boys, physical maturation of the reproductive system, substantial modifications in the digestive process, often resulting in a change of eating habits, and an increasing self-consciousness regarding the physical body. There is thus a sequence: the first year of the first phase of life sees the largest physical growth in the head and nervous system; the first year of the second phase of life sees the largest physical growth in the trunk and substantial changes in the rhythmic system; and the first year of the third phase of life sees the largest physical growth in the limbs and substantial changes in the muscular and digestive systems.

Meeting the Challenge of the Upper Elementary Grades

During seventh grade, the first year of the new phase of development, the child’s central task is to permeate the physical sphere with consciousness. The Waldorf curriculum sees this as the ‘Age of Exploration’ of the physical world. Both the outer physical world—geography and

history—and the child’s own physical nature—health and nutrition—are important themes. In every subject this can be followed through in detail, for example, in handwork, where students make clothes that require measurement and a precise awareness of the physical form. The curriculum in seventh grade integrates the child’s forces of consciousness into the inner and outer physical conditions. In particular, stories of human beings who live in unity with the physical conditions of the world—from the Eskimo to the Alpine farmer—are important. The more complex practical and economic conditions of the modern world can then be contrasted with such historical lifestyles. In seventh grade, it is especially important to expand everything into a larger context. Thus a study of geological layers can introduce the subject of ecology, an important theme for this and the next years.

During eighth grade—the second year of the sentient organization’s development—the child’s life organization is reorganized to serve as a carrier of the new forces of consciousness (sentience). New hormonal patterns appear, secondary sexual characteristics emerge, and new drives awaken. The pulse, circulation, and breathing become more susceptible to changes in the soul or feeling life. Blushing, for example, reveals this new sensitivity. The child becomes more aware of and self-conscious about the organic processes, drives, and rhythms of his or her body. The character of this change is quite distinct from the physical transformation and consciousness of the preceding year.

The child is now faced with the task of permeating with consciousness the spheres of life, rhythm, and formative forces. The Waldorf curriculum supports this task through a study of the forces that form the earth from within (earthquakes, volcanoes, and the movement of the tectonic plates) and from without (wind, waves, and weather). Underlying historical dynamics can be revealed through a study of the Age of Revolutions, which include not only the political and industrial revolutions, but also the electronic and information revolutions. Students learn about social and governmental forms of historical and contemporary nations, in contrast to their study of economic life in seventh grade.

A central theme for eighth grade is the study of life in general, which includes plant ecology, following the previous year’s study of geological ecology, and plant physiology—photosynthesis, and organic chemistry of starches, sugars and fats. Transformations of these processes, such as soap making and oil refining, can then be examined in industrial settings. The formative development of the human being, including the sense and inner organs, tissue layers and skeleton, should be treated dynamically here, with biorhythms as an especially interesting theme. Rhythmic techniques in the arts and crafts support the child’s developing consciousness of this sphere of life. Such techniques include veil painting and shaded drawing, rhythmic and dance forms in music and eurythmy and the use of the plane or spokeshave in woodworking.

Only after these two preparatory years, when consciousness is transforming the already-established (incarnated) bodily nature, are the forces of consciousness freed up from the demands of the child’s lower organization. Only then do they become available for abstract thought, for expression of the inner life of soul and for directing the conscious will, which will be cultivated in high school.

Would the upper grades benefit from a more specialized and detailed approach to the subjects that have traditionally been taught by the class teacher? I believe they would. It is interesting to note that Rudolf Steiner made a remarkable arrangement for the original seventh and eighth grades of the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart. Two teachers, one a specialist in history and literature and the other a specialist in the scientific subjects, were given the two classes to share. Such a shared

approach provides a transition between the single class teacher of the first six grades and many specialist teachers in the high school. Ideally the class teacher would take on a strong, or even a partial role in such a team approach, but there is clearly room for middle school specialist teachers who would be especially capable of providing for the needs of this transition time, when the forces of judgment, criticism and antipathy are already waking but the intellectual capacities are not yet fully available.

The problem of how to structure the upper elementary grades is not limited to Waldorf schools. Public schools also struggle with the relationship of the middle school years to the elementary school and high school. Some schools include the middle school with the elementary school (the 8+4 model); some include it with the upper school (the 6+6 model); others give it a place of its own (the 6+3+3 or 5 + 3 + 4 models).

Similarly, the question of the appropriate age to start formal learning remains a challenging one both in public and private schools. These years have a transitional character not easily placed in terms of their relationship to the preceding and following phases of schooling. It is neither appropriate to remain in the mood of an already concluded phase of development nor to enter fully into the phase that is still being prepared. Waldorf teachers must begin to recognize the unique nature of these transitional periods, and I hope that we will begin to develop new approaches that meet the children's developmental needs at these times, which differ substantially from the preceding and succeeding periods of life.

¹According to Mark Riccio's article in this issue, Stuttgart law prescribed an eight-year elementary school. This seems to resolve the historical question.

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He is currently active as a mentor and school advisor for a young school in Hungary and as an independent researcher and writer on anthroposophic themes. (Articles of his can be found in The Golden Blade 1998, 2001 and 2002.) The above article is drawn from research on child development and the Waldorf curriculum which has resulted in a book awaiting publication.