

International Colloquium on the Older Child

~ Louise deForest

What is the appropriate age to go into first grade? What do we mean by etheric ripeness? And what are the long and short-term consequences of going into first grade too early or too late?

These are some of the many questions discussed during the Older Child Colloquium held at the Goetheanum, in Dornach, Switzerland, this past February. Co-sponsored by IASWECE (the International Association of Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education) and the Pedagogical Section, leading experts and researchers on this theme gathered for a weekend of presentations and discussion. It was an international meeting with school doctors, early childhood educators and class teachers coming from many European countries, South Africa, and North America. Nine areas of research and work around this theme were presented—look for them on the IASWECE website, www.iaswece.org—and several introductory lectures were given by Dr. Claudia McKeen (school doctor in Stuttgart), Philipp Reubke (former early childhood educator and presently in the Coordinating Group of IASWECE) and Claus-Peter Röh (co-leader of the Pedagogical Section). We also had the opportunity to meet with a large group of (mostly German) high school teachers to begin a conversation on this theme.

In North American Waldorf Schools, the importance of this stage of early childhood development has often been misunderstood and confused with the separate question of first grade readiness. Indeed, there is a lack of clarity around the signs of the beginning birth of the etheric, the importance of this stage of development in the whole of human life and the process for establishing school readiness in many of our North American Waldorf Schools. But the situation in many other countries, and here in the United States, as well, in our public educational system, has now reached a point of crisis. Many Waldorf Schools are subsidized by their governments and increasingly the age for entering first grade is being mandated by those governments at a younger and younger age. In the Colloquium, Dr. Rainer Patzlaff (co-author of the book *De-*

velopmental Signatures, among others), presented his research into the economic rationale behind this move to put ever-younger children into the grade school and emphasized that there is no pedagogical research informing these decisions. Dr. Martina Schmidt, from Germany, shared some results of the IPSUM research project with the focus on School Entry Age and Health Outcomes, embarked upon in response to the lowering of school entrance age in Germany. Among many other findings, the researchers found that the younger the school-age child is, the more at risk he or she is for illnesses, asthma and accidents.

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There is no better way to undermine human potential and spiritual freedom than to educate children through rote memorization and testing. It is clear that all children pass through the same developmental stages at the same time and that each stage has its purpose in the growth of the human being and the forming of his or her soul forces. Waldorf schools are unique because they are based on observing and serving the developmental needs of the human being. So the question arises of how much our schools can compromise with governments and Boards of Education before we have lost the ideals of Waldorf education? By sending children to first grade either too early or too late, we ignore this pivotal stage of development and weaken the child's will to take hold of life through his or her own initiative. As Claudia McKeen said in her opening remarks, "We must all become spiritual revolutionaries."

A second Colloquium is planned for October 2014 in preparation for a World Conference in 2015 with the theme of transitions in the life of the child. ♦