

School Readiness and the Transition from Kindergarten to School

— Claudia McKeen, translated by Margot M. Saar

Why is so much emphasis placed on school readiness in Waldorf education? Why is it so essential that children start school at the right time, that is to say, at the moment when they are ready to move on from “implicit” learning—learning unconsciously through imitation, experience and repetition—to “explicit” learning, that is, the targeted absorbing of information which can later be deliberately re-called or remembered?

There is no scientific study which proves that an earlier school entry would support or enhance successful learning in children—on the contrary. For approximately seven years now, children in Germany have been starting school earlier. Quite recently the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel* reported that in Berlin, where since 2006 the school entry cut-off date has been brought forward by six months to December 31—which means that children in Berlin start school at the age of 5.6 years—ten times more children than before have stayed a year longer in the school entry phase (first two years of school). It is also known that early school starters often have to repeat a year in the course of their schooling, or leave school at an earlier stage than children who were older when they first entered school. These children are given the feeling that they are not good enough and they tend to feel over-challenged as a result. Their motivation for learning is compromised in a way that jeopardizes their future relationship to learning and their whole educational biography.

These facts alone would suggest that a later school

start is the better option. They don't even consider the effect that earlier school entry has on a child's health in later life as a result of premature intellectual demands and the cutting short of the time spent in kindergarten. Early school starters have less time to play freely, to take hold of and work through their growing bodies, and to mature. The forces needed for implicit learning, which are naturally active in children during the first seven years of life, are inhibited prematurely as implicit learning is replaced by explicit, intellectual learning. Younger children do not yet have the forces available that are needed for this approach, nor are they sufficiently mature physically. The age of school entry is not just a question of greater or lesser learning success; it affects whether or children can develop into healthy, creative and autonomous adults. Pedagogical knowledge and experience and economic-political interests are fighting a hard battle over this question.

In an address Rudolf Steiner gave on the evening before he started his lectures on *The Foundations of Human Experience*, he spoke of this cultural battle: “The Waldorf School will be living proof of the effectiveness of the anthroposophical orientation toward life. It will be a unified school in the sense that it only considers how to teach in the way demanded by the human being, by the totality of the human essence. We must put everything at the service of achieving this goal.” He then spoke of the flexibility that would be necessary to make the compromises needed to “conform to what will be far removed from our ideals.” He added, “We have a difficult struggle ahead of us,

but nevertheless, we must do this cultural deed” (*The Foundations of Human Experience*, pp. 29-30).

The question we need to ask today is: *How far can we go in making compromises and when have we reached the point where what we offer is no longer Waldorf education? The question of school readiness is one we must not compromise on! How do we find the arguments that help us to raise our voices in this cultural battle for the child, for the future of the emerging adult? Are we spiritual revolutionaries?*

The metamorphosis of forces of growth into forces of thinking

What are the forces like that, at the time of implicit learning, shape the child’s body and organs, and later form the foundation for conscious memory? What is the ether body? What does it mean that the ether forces metamorphose? How can we understand the process in which forces that were used to form the body and the organs are transformed into the forces needed for conscious learning and remembering?

The child’s individuality arrives from the spiritual world and incarnates out of lightness and spacelessness into the earth’s gravity and materiality, connecting with the earthly substances that make up the body. This process does not happen all by itself. The spirit-soul needs a mediator, and it finds this mediator in the etheric forces. The etheric forces are the link between the spirit-soul and earthly materiality. They can take hold of matter so that it ceases to follow its own physical laws and begins to obey a higher order: the laws of life. The etheric forces are able to build up a material earthly body for the spirit-soul to reside in. Once the etheric forces have formed the organs and built up the physical body, the part of them that is not needed for the lifelong preservation of life and organ activity will become available to

the life of spirit and soul.

In the 1924 book *Extending Practical Medicine* Rudolf Steiner described to physicians how the ether and growth forces relate to the ordinary forces needed for thinking and mental representation:

At the beginning of a human life on earth—most clearly so during the embryonic period—the forces of the etheric body act as powers of configuration and growth. As life progresses, a part of these forces becomes emancipated from activity in configuration and growth and is transformed into powers of thought, the very powers that create the shadowy thought world we have in ordinary consciousness. It is of the greatest importance to know that ordinary human powers of thought are refined forces of configuration and growth (p. 6).

These formative, sculptural forces, which build up the organs, become available for the activities of soul and spirit in as much as they are released from the physical body (see Figure 1). They return to the body if they are needed as healing forces in case of illness in order to support regeneration and the building-up of organs. When we are sick we lie down in bed and notice how our awareness, our perception and soul life are weakened until the ether forces become fully available again, often in a new form, once we have recovered. Equally, these forces are active in us when we are engaged in artistic or creative work and they help us to attain higher knowledge.

There are always two sides we can look at in child development: there is the body that grows, ripens and evolves, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, a relationship evolves with the surroundings through perception and conscious awareness that comes to expression in the life of spirit and soul. At every step of physical development we can look at the spirit-soul

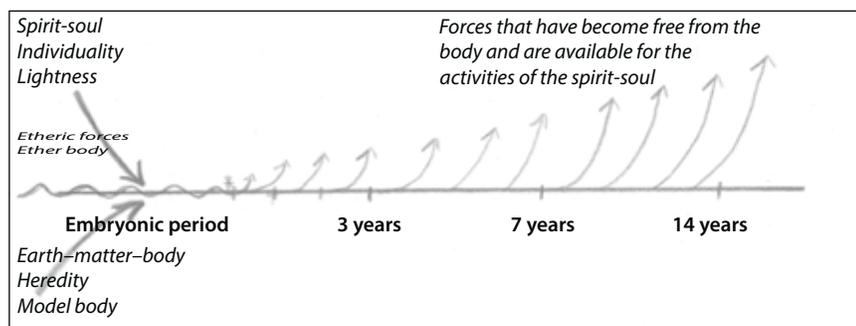


Figure 1

The etheric forces’ gradual emancipation from the body and increasing support of the activities of soul and spirit during child development

and ask, “What is new now?”—and vice-versa.

There is tremendous scope for research in the field of developmental physiology, a field that needs the cooperation of teachers and physicians. What soul faculties emerge when the lungs have finished growing, or the liver? What about when the child’s physical form changes in the seventh year? Once we understand this, we will be able to recognize abnormal developments at an early stage and prevent them. Children’s drawings, and the way children play, reflect this inner development.

With the change of teeth around the age of seven, the formation and building up of the dental enamel, the body’s hardest substance, comes to an end. Behind the twenty milk teeth, thirty-two permanent teeth lie hidden in the jawbones, ready to be forced out gradually. We notice how the forces that were previously active in building up the teeth are released and appear in the child’s spirit-soul—as powers that preserve and maintain form, and as the ability to accurately mirror thoughts, experiences and learning contents and to consciously remember them.

From the age of seven, children are able to follow a longer story because they are now able to relate the end of the story to its beginning. If we look at the development and bone structure of the limbs at this age, around the time of school readiness, we see how the individual bones become more and more connected due to the progressing calcification. If we compare this stage with that of a one-year-old, whose ossification centers still appear like isolated islands floating in the fatty tissue, we get a sense of how the etheric forces, which are at work in the calcification and ossification processes, provide the possibility for coherent thinking in the spirit-soul once they have become free. The image of the one-year-old reflects the evanescent impressions of the young child whose perceptions are separate and unrelated.

There is another aspect to how the ether forces affect the child’s body in the first seven-year period. Rudolf Steiner spoke of it on March 1, 1924, in his Karma Lectures. “. . . For in effect, when he is at the change of teeth, man not only exchanges the teeth he first received, for others, but this is also the moment in life when the entire human being—as organisation—is for the first time renewed. . . . Man, we must say, when he is born, receives something like a model of his human form. He gets this model from his forefathers; they give him the model to take with him into life. Then, working on the model, he himself develops what he afterwards becomes. What he develops, however, is the

outcome of what he himself brings with him from the spiritual world.” Rudolf Steiner then asked, “Why do human beings need such a model at all? . . . Originally . . . man was pre-destined to come to the earth in such a way that he could form his own physical body from the substances of the earth, just as he gathers to himself his ether-body from the cosmic ether-substance” (*Karmic Relationships, Volume 2*, pp. 78-80).

If that were still the case, we would form a physical body that would “fit” our spirit-soul perfectly. Our body would always be in perfect harmony with what we are in spirit and soul. We lost this faculty due to the luciferic and ahrimanic influences and we therefore need to take on a hereditary body. As a consequence of the Fall of Man we need a hereditary body that serves us as a model for seven years. We then build up our own body that is more or less individualized depending on how strong or weak our “I” is. The success of this transformation and adaptation of our body determines the extent to which we are able to know and put into practice our spiritual impulses in a given incarnation. In the same lecture Rudolf Steiner said, “If it is a true school, [a school] should bring to unfoldment in the human being what he has brought with him from spiritual worlds into this physical life on earth” (*Karmic Relationships, Volume 2*, pp. 80-81).

The consequences of premature school entry

In observing the metamorphosis of the forces of growth, we discover the laws of the ether forces, which build up the body and the organs, and which also work freely in thinking and mental activity. Observation of the transformation of the model body shows us furthermore how the inherited body needs to be individualized. This is what children do during the first seven years of life. In rebuilding the model body they inherited, children need to wholly take hold of it so that their spirit can imprint itself into the new form. For this to happen, the body needs to be supple and malleable. Only then can it be a suitable vehicle for the child’s individuality and destiny.

A number of factors can hinder this process of individualization. Vitamin D and fluoride, for instance, harden the body too early. Vaccinations, antipyretics, and antibiotics prevent the inflammatory, warm diseases that help children to re-melt their model body. The same happens when children are addressed intellectually too early, when they start school before they are ready, and when the transition from implicit to

explicit learning is induced prematurely. Instead of being given time to work on the body, the organ-forming forces are drawn to the child's consciousness to be used for learning, abstract thinking and conscious memorizing. The child's reshaping of his or her model body is interrupted or cut short.

It makes a difference whether or not we give children time and support for working on their inherited model body at all levels in order to individualize this body. This work, which proceeds in stages, needs time. In the first two or three years, mainly the head and neurosensory system mature. The process of gaining awareness, of learning to stand up and master the body, starts with the head and the senses. It involves forces that are activated in the body through imitation and that, as sensorimotor intelligence, enhance the child's mobility. Between the ages of three to five, the child's respiration and heart rhythm are established. The rhythmic system is taken hold of and individualized. The forces which gradually rise up from this sphere to the child's consciousness are the ones that enable children to unfold their magical imagination. In the last third of the first seven-year period, children take hold of their system of metabolism and limbs. They develop secure motor skills, their movements become more differentiated and with the change of their outer form the transformation of the model body comes to a conclusion. The forces that are now set free appear, as forces of memory and imagination, in the conscious awareness of the child who has attained school readiness.

If we draw these forces away from the neurosensory system prematurely and direct them to the child's consciousness, if we use them too early for thinking and mental image forming, they will be missing from the process of growth and maturation that is still going on in other parts of the body. What we increasingly see as a result of this is the dissociation, the drifting apart, of the cognitive faculties, which appear isolated and excessively pronounced, and the child's social and motor skills, which cannot come to maturation due to the insufficient development of the rhythmic system and the system of metabolism and limbs.

It was not until 1924 that Rudolf Steiner spoke of the model body and its transformation during the first seven years of childhood. He did this in the Karma lecture of March 1, 1924 (see *Karmic Relationships, Volume 2*), in the lecture of June 25, 1924 of *Education for Special Needs*, and in lecture 4 of the "Pastoral-Medical Course" (most recently translated as *Broken Vessels*), given on September 11, 1924.

In the latter lecture, Steiner looked beyond the healthy transformation of the physical model body in the first seven-year period to the developments in the second and third seven-year periods. He explained that the quality of this transformation process would affect whether or not a person could "be given full responsibility" in later life because the connection between their "I" and physical body had come to be too loose or too tight.

There is a second question connected with the remodeling of the model body that concerns early childhood educators and lower and upper school teachers alike: *What indications are there in kindergarten as to whether children transform and individualize their inherited model bodies in a healthy and appropriate way? What indications are there for class teachers and upper school teachers as to whether the transformation of the model body proceeded harmoniously or whether the development was in parts too fast, too slow, or incomplete? What can be done during the school years to help the body catch up with what has been neglected in maturation so that the children can find the impulses they brought with them in their biographies?*

The healthy metamorphosis of the growth forces is hindered today not only by premature school entry but by many other factors such as vaccinations, by giving children fluoride and vitamin D, and through premature intellectualization, all of which tend to harden the body too early and bring about the withdrawal of forces that are then missing at other levels of the human organization. ♦

References

- Steiner, Rudolf. *Broken Vessels: The Spiritual Structure of Human Frailty* (Anthroposophic Press, 2004).
- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Foundations of Human Experience* (Anthroposophic Press, 1996).
- Steiner, Rudolf. *Education for Special Needs* (Rudolf Steiner Press, 2005).
- Steiner, Rudolf, and Ita Wegman. *Extending Practical Medicine* (Rudolf Steiner Press, 1996).
- Steiner, Rudolf. *Karmic Relationships, Volume 2* (London: Anthroposophical Publishing Co., 1955).

Claudia McKeen, MD is a general practitioner and school and kindergarten doctor. She is also a lecturer at the Waldorf Kindergarten Seminar in Stuttgart, Germany. This article is reproduced from *School Readiness Today* (WECAN, 2014).