The Transition Experience of Waldorf Elementary Students to Non-Waldorf High Schools

Peter Lawton

Scant research exists on the educational outcomes of Waldorf education as compared to those from more mainstream forms of education. More important than so-called "measureables" is the lack of research concerning the actual, qualitative experiences of Waldorf graduates[1]. An important area of concern is the transition experience of Waldorf elementary students to non-Waldorf high schools. The lack of research regarding the high school transition experience poses significant challenges not only for Waldorf students and families in the process of choosing a high school, but also for Waldorf elementary schools as they seek to prepare their students for other educational settings. After providing a solid educational foundation using an alternative approach to "traditional" schooling, Waldorf elementary schools must necessarily ensure their students are prepared for other educational settings for the simple fact that many students continue their education in non-Waldorf high schools.

High School Readiness

High school readiness is a critical topic in Waldorf elementary schools, a concern never far from the hearts and minds of Waldorf elementary teachers, middle-school-aged students, and families, both current and prospective. The topic of high school readiness is perhaps more compelling in areas without a Waldorf high school. Given the methodological differences between Waldorf schools and "traditional," comprehensive high schools, high school readiness is a lightning rod for many families in their assessment of the ultimate value of Waldorf education.

Perennial preparedness concerns are often expressed by teachers, students, and families in Waldorf elementary schools in regard to the academic content of high school. Areas of concern are somewhat obvious given some of the unique attributes of Waldorf pedagogical practice. These concerns include technology (Waldorf elementary classrooms have no computers) and science (Waldorf science utilizes a non-mainstream, phenomenological approach). Other concerns include differences in instructional practices and methods including test-taking (Waldorf students take substantially fewer tests, and the tests tend to involve more qualitative measures than high school testing), and the use of textbooks (Waldorf elementary schools do not use textbooks). Traditional social concerns encompass the impression of the Waldorf school as an insulated or protected "social bubble." Social anxieties are not typically experienced as acutely as academic-preparedness concerns, but they remain nagging considerations for Waldorf families, particularly as their children reach middle-school-age.

Quality, Phenomena, and Meaning

To explore the high school transition experience of former Waldorf elementary students, I conducted 13 in-depth, 90-minute interviews of former Waldorf students who attended non-Waldorf public and private high schools. I interviewed former Waldorf elementary students who were currently seniors in high school or who had recently graduated from high school. (This strategy ended up being significant, and is further explored elsewhere in an examination of implications.) Of the 13 participants, nine attended large urban and suburban public high schools, three attended smaller urban and suburban parochial schools, and one attended a small performing arts charter high school.

The question I attempted to answer through interviews was not 'How do former Waldorf elementary students do in high school?' Waldorf elementary students are part of a demographic population typically excelling in subsequent academic environments. It would be extremely difficult from a methodological standpoint to draw any direct correlation between outward academic success in high school and Waldorf elementary education. Instead, the question I attempted to answer was 'How do Waldorf elementary students experience the transition to high school?' As such, my approach was both qualitative and phenomenological. It was qualitative in the sense that I explored specific curricular/methodological processes, not grades or GPAs. In other words, in terms of academics, I was interested in inner qualities, not external

1 EDITOR NOTE: We hope that the relative paucity of such research will be remedied with the future publication of Phase IV of the Waldorf Graduates Study, conducted by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education.

measures. My approach was further phenomenological in the sense that I explored the *phenomenon* of the transition experience, specifically the *meaning* students gained from their transition experiences. Meaning, in terms of curricular/methodological processes, may be further interpreted as a measure of developmental appropriateness and motivation. Simply put, the focus of my interviews concerned *what* Waldorf students experienced in their transition to high school and *how* they experienced it.

The Transition Experience

Interviews revealed that students transitioning from a K-8 elementary learning experience in a Waldorf school to more "traditional" school curriculums in comprehensive 9-12 high schools experienced important changes in the academic and social realms. Changes in the academic program across the transition required Waldorf students to adapt to differences in teaching methods and learning styles. Changes in educational environments also required students to forge new relationships with peers and teachers.

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES. If interviewee responses were any indication of the general transition experience of Waldorf elementary students, concerns about specific academic content may be unwarranted. Interviewees were fairly unified in their descriptions of academic challenges associated with their transition to high school. Twelve of 13 participants reported doing very well academically in their freshman year of high school, while half the interviewees described their high school academic programs as basically "easy." None of the 13 interviewees mentioned feeling unprepared in any specific content area, including science and technology (except with regard to keyboarding skills). Neither did any participant mention feeling underprepared in other content areas such as math, language arts, or world languages. *Participants reported their academic adjustment to high school pertained more to new instructional methods than any academic content itself.* The adjustment period was relatively short, less than a year for most.

New learning styles in high school included a de-emphasis on artistic and experiential modes of learning in favor of more passive, visual approaches, including the use of lecture, textbooks, and worksheets. Participants also reported that teaching methods, including grading and testing, became more fact-based and concept-driven in high school. Student comments on grading and testing were fairly unified. While 12 of 13 interviewees were motivated to achieve desired grades, many students also felt grading was one-dimensional and heavily weighted towards the reproduction of facts.

In addition to their experience adjusting to new styles of learning and teaching methods, *all 13 participants reported a decline in their intrinsic connection to academic material in high school*. Despite experiencing a decline in interest and engagement (meaning), students maintained their motivation to do well academically and achieve desired grades. While there were exceptions in individual classrooms and with specific junior- and senior-level teachers, in general students found the academic material in high school less intrinsically meaningful than in the Waldorf school.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES. Student descriptions of their social adjustment to high school were less unified than those of their academic adjustment. Participants stated that the most significant social challenge across the transition involved breaking into what presented as pre-formed social groups or cliques. The majority of student comments regarding community concerned school and class size. Nine of the 13 interviewees attended larger high schools. All nine reported a decline in their sense of overall community in their transition to high school, including their general relationships with peers and teachers. Two of the four students attending smaller high schools described positive transitions in terms of their sense of community. The negative experience of two of the participants attending smaller high schools is addressed further below. A majority of students reported that their general sense of community improved somewhat during their junior and senior years.

Three Transitional Phases

The story of the transition experience, as told by Waldorf elementary students who continued their education at non-Waldorf high schools, involved three distinct chapters or phases: (1) establishing competency, (2) analyzing and assessing experience, and (3) transformation. The transition experience may be compared to the process of learning to drive. In the initial phase of learning to drive, learners gain competence by familiarizing themselves with basic knowledge, including the names and functions of the different parts of the car and basic traffic laws. Learners also begin to apply their basic knowledge with behind-the-wheel practice, eventually driving solo. Young drivers in the second phase of learning to drive begin to analyze the driving experience. They

begin to combine different, discrete aspects of driving into larger frameworks of understanding. They also begin to assess the value of driving. They ask questions like, "What can driving do for me?" or "What kind of driver do I want to be?"

There (hopefully) comes a moment during this second phase of learning to drive when everything "clicks," when all the discrete aspects of the act of driving come together, and for the first time the driver is able to internalize all the physical and mental movements of driving into one fluid movement or into some sense of the whole. Now the driver can see beyond the act of driving itself and her eyes take in the horizon for the first time. At this moment, driving, which was formerly an end in itself, becomes the means to some other end. This integration marks the end of the second phase of learning to drive, and emerging drivers enter a third phase in which they begin to use their driving ability to take them where they want and need to go. Now, transformed, they are truly in the "driver's seat." The drivers in this third phase (again, ideally) use their driving knowledge and ability to self-actualize, to fulfill their own unique destiny or life project.

Waldorf elementary schools must necessarily ensure their students are prepared for other educational settings for the simple fact that many students continue their education in non-Waldorf high schools.

Phase One of the Transition: Establishing Competence

The first phase of the experience of Waldorf elementary students transitioning to non-Waldorf highs schools involved their need to establish competence academically and socially in their new school programs. Students initially attempted to establish their academic competence by achieving desired grades. This outward measure gave them a way to compare their performance with other students and experience a positive sense of self-esteem. Social competency involved establishing one or more personal connections within the larger and more impersonal environment of high school. The initial transition phase was relatively short for most students, lasting less than a semester.

Participants reported the main challenge to achieving desired grades initially involved acclimating to new instructional *methods* rather than to any academic content per se. Indeed, research concerning the normative high school transition (the transition to high school from "traditional" elementary, middle, and junior high schools) confirmed the need on the part of students to adjust to new instructional methods as a major challenge (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982). Researchers found the highest level of student concern across the high school transition regarded "academic nuts and bolts." These were defined as the knowledge of how high school works—requirements, structures, and terminology—and more importantly, the knowledge of where to go to get help (Beresford, 2013). The most significant element in participant descriptions of establishing competence involved the understanding of how grades worked, in particular, how to "work for a grade." In addition, one of the new structural elements Waldorf students experienced in their transition was the move to a departmentalized organization of classes and schedules in high school. Normative transition research further confirmed transitional challenges associated with moving from self-contained school organizations to more period-based, departmentalized environments (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995). Consequentially, while Waldorf students may be experiencing certain instructional practices for the first time, a certain "nuts and bolts" adjustment may be expected for any high school freshman.

The majority of participant comments regarding their initial transitional social challenges (establishing a sense of belonging, including breaking into cliques) involved school size, both with regard to the large size of the high schools in question and the small size of their former Waldorf elementary school. All nine of the participants attending larger high schools reported feeling less personal connection with teachers and a less familiar connection with the student population in general than at their former Waldorf elementary school. Two of the four participants attending smaller high schools described community in their schools more positively than the nine attending larger schools. Smaller high schools emerged in the normative high school transition literature as one of the most important structural characteristics associated with academic and social success across the high school transition (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). Positive academic and social outcomes, including feeling a sense of belonging, occurred more often in smaller high schools with student populations under 1,000 (Lee & Smith, 1997).

Lee and Smith (1997) further explain that the positive outcomes associated with smaller schools did not follow for a smaller subgroup of students who were unable to locate a peer group in high school. Kinney (1993) found the more polymorphous environment of large high schools was largely positive for those students who had experienced marginalization in their smaller, more hierarchically-structured former schools. In fact, of the four interviewees attending high schools smaller than 1,000, only two developed positive friendships across their transition and reported feeling a close-knit sense of community comparable to their Waldorf experience. The other two participants described feeling like outcasts in their respective smaller high schools. Both students experienced difficulty finding their "crowd" and eventually switched schools, one to a larger urban high school and one to an even smaller arts-based school. Interpreted through the lens of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, neither of these students was able to overcome an initial transition challenges, perhaps in part because of an inability to achieve a sense of belonging. In terms of Kinney's study (1993), they may have been unable to achieve a sense of belonging precisely because of the small size of their respective high schools.

Lee and Smith (1997) used a national sample to attribute positive outcomes in smaller schools to greater opportunities for social participation with peers and personal relationships with teachers. Personal connections with teachers emerged as one of the most significant factors associated with a positive transition experience (Beresford, 2013). Simmons et al. (1987) hypothesized that students transitioning from smaller schools into larger schools may experience a form of cumulative stress from meeting a large number of new peers, while at the same time acclimating to new schedules and instructional methods. This cumulative stress may be part of what was experienced initially by Waldorf elementary students attending larger high schools.

Phase Two of the Transition: Analyzing and Assessing Experience

After learning the "nuts and bolts" of high school, students began the process of analyzing and assessing the value of their academic and social experiences based on whether the academic program fit their learning needs and style, and whether the friendships brought with them from the Waldorf school or made initially in the first few months of high school met the criteria for satisfying long-term friendships. This secondary transition phase—analyzing and assessing experience—lasted longer than the first phase, between one and two years. Students in this second phase made many comparisons between their academic and social experiences in high school and their former Waldorf experiences. The second stage largely involved a meaning-making activity, engaging students in reflection regarding the relevance of their academic program and the nature and quality of friendships. Upon self-analysis, students reported a decrease in their personal connection to academic material across their transition to high school. This decrease in meaning was experienced most intensely during the freshman and sophomore years, improving slightly in junior and senior years through the impact of unique attributes of particular teachers.

> Given the methodological differences between Waldorf schools and "traditional," comprehensive high schools, high school readiness is a lightning rod for many families in their assessment of the ultimate value of Waldorf education.

Students additionally reported an increase in extrinsic motivation across their transition to high school indirectly proportional to declines in intrinsic motivation and meaning. For instance, despite the fact that the majority of participants described grades as one-dimensional, they nonetheless felt invigorated by receiving desired grades and satisfying the need to "know" how they compared to others. Students were excited by their experience of the extrinsic value of excelling in a graded, competitive academic environment. Part of what students described as positive in their assessment of the value of their academic experiences in high school involved the belief that they compared favorably to others in the "real world," as well as the feeling that they were learning the "real world" skills they would need in college and beyond.

The motivation of students to maintain desired grades or succeed in terms of outward measures of performance is certainly not viewed here as a challenge. However, the decline in intrinsic motivation across the transition to high school, that is to say, the decline in interest and engagement in *learning itself*, is certainly a challenge begging analysis. The first-phase academic challenge of acclimating to new instructional methods involved a relatively simple analysis. Students first had to learn the language of high school methodology

before applying that knowledge to academic content. The second-phase academic challenge of declining interest and engagement is a much more complex issue. Decreases in interest and engagement also presented a longer-standing challenge to students. Whereas the process of adjusting to new instructional methods lasted under a year for the majority of participants, the decrease in intrinsic motivation continued throughout high school.

Although declines in interest and engagement in the transition to high school is a phenomenon too complex to fully address here, exploring the intersection of *meaning* and *intellect* may point the way to fuller explication. Rudolf Steiner (2007) believed the intellect may only engage fully with material already learned through direct experience and emotional connection; direct experience and emotional connection continue to be the models for all learning even into adolescence in Waldorf schools. Mainstream research has similarly identified several factors affecting the intellectual reasoning skills of adolescents. Corroborating Steiner (2007) and John Dewey (1997), researchers found reasoning skills are enhanced when applied to an existing knowledge base familiar and appropriately structured (Byrnes, 2005). A second factor affecting reasoning is motivation. Researchers found adolescents reason better when they are *personally interested* in the subject matter (Klaczynski, Byrnes, & Jacobs, 2001). So, in a sense, meaning and reason have a "chicken and egg" relationship. It is difficult to imagine one without the other.

A third factor affecting reasoning is the processing demands of the task. The more abstractions that need to be held simultaneously, the greater the likelihood an individual will resort to former, more concrete methods of reasoning or take a focused view of the whole (Byrnes, 2005); this difficulty corresponds to participants' complaints about the more fact-based, concept-driven approach they experienced in high school. In addition to the partial views of reality offered by instructional approaches dealing in facts (bypassing experience and appealing directly to the intellect)—and quite apart from the socially isolating effects of passive educational experiences—the decline in meaning experienced by Waldorf students across their transition to high school may be in part due to the imposition of knowledge beyond young learners' capacities and learning styles. Simply put, creative, experiential, and cooperative learning is not only authentic and meaningful, it develops higher-order thinking skills.

Phase Three of the Transition: Transformation

Students achieved basic competencies in an initial transition phase and analyzed and assessed the value of their experiences in a second phase. Students in the third phase integrated their familiarity with high school into more holistic and internalized understandings. Transformed by the activities of analysis and assessment, they now – to return to our driving analogy – made their "own road" academically and socially. This third phase coincided for many with a positive shift in their experience of academic programs between 9th and 10th, and between 11th and 12th grades, as well as a positive shift in the nature and quality of relationships with both peers and teachers. Learning in this third phase was more transformative than in previous phases, in large part because it was self-generated. Learning was also self-actualized because it was guided by more self-aware, existential purposes.

Implications for Waldorf Elementary Schools

It is beyond the scope of this particular investigation to contemplate any changes to traditional Waldorf elementary practice. However, it may be fair to suggest that in conversations among faculty members and with current and prospective families, the topic of "traditional" high school teaching methodologies is more immediate and relevant than the topic of content readiness. Interpreted through the lens, for instance, of Bloom's (1956) cognitive taxonomy, students may not be able to even address possible content gaps until they first acclimate to new learning styles and teaching methodologies. In other words, the questions whether or how Waldorf eighth-graders should be formally introduced to computer programs or science terminology may be less important than questions of their readiness to experience syllabi, rubrics, multiple choice tests, weighted grades, and performance-oriented grading schemes. Some direct instruction in high school methods and terminology may be helpful at best, innocuous at worst. However, given the possible damaging effects of, for instance, performance-oriented grading schemes on elementary-aged children, and their dubious efficacy in preparing students for future competitive environments, and given the relatively short "nuts and bolts" adjustment period in high school, it may be enough to simply give Waldorf eighth-graders a "heads-up" on some of the more unhealthy, "traditional" instructional methods to come.

The question how to interpret the social transition to high school is somewhat more complex than academic considerations. Positive effects of a small community for elementary-aged children notwithstanding, the challenge of moving from the smaller Waldorf school to larger high schools was more significant for those students with shyer, more introverted temperaments. Furthermore, attending smaller high schools resulted in a positive social experience for only half of the former Waldorf students attending such smaller schools. Not only is mainstream research somewhat mixed on what size of high school is best and for whom, similarly mixed results were reached by research studies concerning what types of elementary-, middle-, or junior-high-school-models best prepare students for the transition to high school (Simmons et al., 1987; Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2011).

Perhaps one implication for Waldorf elementary schools concerning the social transition to high school involves efforts to counsel families in picking the right high school for their individual child. A good counselling strategy may involve anticipating the unique, socioemotional experience of each individual student; it may also involve providing a clearer picture of the normative high school transition. As the scholarly literature showed, some of the social challenges related by participants may be interpreted in terms of the "normal" high school transition experience, or as challenges experienced by freshman regardless of their former school experiences. This research may somewhat dispel the hypothesis that Waldorf is some form of "social bubble." Mainstream research, indeed, confirmed many of the socioemotional challenges experienced by former Waldorf elementary students. These socioemotional challenges included relational challenges (Langenkamp, 2009), anxiety (Barber and Olsen, 2004), and decreases in motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Communicating this picture of normative, socioemotional, transitional challenges may be helpful in ameliorating the concern on the part of some families that Waldorf students will necessarily be at a disadvantage by attending small, cozy Waldorf elementary schools, or by later attending larger, more impersonal high schools.

A final implication involves the way the Waldorf community conducts formal or informal, scientific or anecdotal, research into the experience of our Waldorf graduates. If, as I claim, students necessarily went through a phase of establishing competency, in large part by first learning the methodological "nuts and bolts" of high school before they were able to analyze and assess their initial academic experiences, then it may be fair to assume students in their initial transitionary phases would not be in a position to analyze their experiences fairly or holistically. My decision to interview seniors and high school graduates was influenced by my concern that young students, in the throes of their transition experience, may not be fully able to clearly analyze and assess that same experience. I worried freshman would over-react to areas of perceived lack of preparation without being able to bracket or contextualize initial transitional challenges and distinguish them from ongoing or structural challenges. For instance, I worried freshmen might report knowing absolutely *nothing* about "real" science, only to realize several years later that they want to pursue a career in science expressly *because* of their Waldorf science experience, or in spite of their (initial) high school science experience. (Several advanced students, in fact, reported similar transformations in their attitude.) This is not intended as a criticism of high school science curriculums; it is a concern about how Waldorf science is portrayed, and, more importantly, about the ability of a high school freshman to discern the source of transitional challenges.

> Researchers found the highest level of student concern across the high school transition regarded "academic nuts and bolts." These were defined as the knowledge of how high school works—requirements, structures, and terminology—and more importantly, the knowledge of where to go to get help.

Interviewing seniors and older students allowed for initial transitional phases to play out, and it allowed the participants to contextualize and assess their own transitional experiences, which I do not believe they would have been able to do as freshman or even sophomores. Furthermore, interviewing seniors and high school graduates revealed further transitional phases such as the change from intrinsic to more extrinsic measures of motivation. Taking a snapshot of the transition experience at any point in time may be a bit like isolating one point on the circumference of a circle and expecting it to provide the full picture. Only

by taking a longer-range view does the nature of the curve come into view.

REFERENCES

Alspaugh, J. W., & Harting, R. D. (1995). Transition effects of school grade-level organization on student achievement. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, *28*(3), 145-49.

Barber, B. K., & Olsen, J. A. (2004). *Assessing the transitions to middle and high school. Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(1), 3-30.

Beresford, M. J. (2013). *The high school freshman transition* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ball State University.

Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals.* New York, NY: David McKay Company.

Byrnes, J. P. (2005). Cognitive development during adolescence. In G. R. Adams & M. D. Berzonsky (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence.* Retrieved from http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781405133029_chunk_g978140513302913

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Eccles, J. S., & Midgley, C. (1989). *Stage/environment fit: Developmentally appropriate classrooms for early adolescents.* Ames, R. E., & Ames, C. (Eds.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Felner, R. D., Ginter, M., & Primavera, J. (1982). Primary prevention during school transitions: Social support and environmental structure. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 10*(3), 277-290.

Kinney, D. A. (1993). From nerds to normals: The recovery of identity among adolescents from middle school to high school. *Sociology of Education, 66*(1), 21-40.

Klaczynski, P. A., Byrnes, J. E., & Jacobs, J. E. (2001). Introduction to the special issue on the development of decision-making. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 22*(3), 225–236.

Langenkamp, A. G. (2009). Following different pathways: Social integration, achievement, and the transition to high school. *American Journal of Education, 116*(1), 69-97.

Lee, V. E., & Smith, J. B. (1997). High school size: Which works best and for whom? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 19*(3), 205-227.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review, 50*(4), 370-396.

Simmons, R. G., Burgeson, R., Carlton-Ford, S., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). The impact of cumulative change in early adolescence. *Child Development, 58*(5), 1220-1234.

Steiner, R. (2007). *Balance in teaching.* Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

Weiss, C. C., & Baker-Smith, E. C. (2010). Eighth-grade school form and resilience in the transition to high school: A comparison of middle schools and K-8 schools. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 20*(4), 825-839.

Peter Lawton, *Ed.D., has been a class teacher at City of Lakes Waldorf School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for seventeen years. Prior to becoming a Waldorf teacher, he taught mathematics for Minneapolis public schools. This article is based on his doctoral dissertation on the same topic.*