



The Lowering of School Age and the Changes in Childhood: An Interim Report

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In December of 2003 the magazine *Erziehungskunst* (The Art of Education) published an article on the salutogenetic project “Gesundheitsfördernde Pädagogik” (Pedagogy Promoting Health), which was undertaken that autumn (2003) by the pedagogical research section of the Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen (Association of Waldorf Schools in Germany) and the Institute for Pedagogy, Ecology of the Senses, and Media Studies in Stuttgart. The project was commissioned by the German Association of Waldorf Schools, the International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens, the Society for Anthroposophical Physicians in Germany, the Medical Section, and the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum. The impetus for the project was given by the impending lowering of the school age in various states in Germany. Both school doctors and Waldorf teachers are worried about this because the anthroposophical view of the human being is quite specific in this matter. Academic learning is not to be started at an arbitrary point: when one starts too early, growth forces are used up which should in fact still be used to form the physical constitution. Starting earlier is done at the expense of these vital forces and thus jeopardizes the further development of the child. With the health of many modern children being taxed enough as it is, a further threat could be formed by the additional stress of lowering the elementary school age by a full year.

Therefore an initiative group, consisting of physicians, scientists, and people working out of Waldorf pedagogy, set itself the task to engage in scientific research on young children to investigate the connection between the development of a healthy constitution and the development of learning. Reports in three areas were planned from the inception; the work has progressed in the meantime, and in this article we would like to report how far we have come.

Should School Age Also Be Lowered in Waldorf Schools?

In the autumn of 2003 we sent out a relatively wide-ranging questionnaire in order to gain an idea of the views held by kindergarten teachers and lower grade colleagues in different areas of Germany with regard to the present-day pedagogical situation. We wanted to know what their experience told them concerning the question of children starting school earlier, and, especially, what long-term changes they have noticed in child development.

It became obvious that these questions have conse-

This is a translation of an article that appeared in the German journal, *Erziehungskunst*, Vol. 5 (2004), and is published here by permission of the authors.

quences for the future position of the Waldorf schools and Waldorf kindergartens, consequences that also extend into the area of politics. For in several states in Germany, preparations are underway in state schools for children to begin elementary school at an earlier age. And not only that: it will also no longer be possible to allow children to repeat a grade. Until recently, children could be put back a year, but this will be forbidden in the near future, with very few exceptions. It is already quite a common occurrence that parents are given the option to send their five-year-old to school earlier if they wish to do so (the so-called “Kann-Kinder” [able children]); in cases where parents avail themselves of that opportunity, there is no way back.

Even though the Waldorf schools are not obliged by law to join in lowering the elementary school age, they would still have to comply with the ban on sending children back a grade. This raises the question of how Waldorf schools can still attract students in the future, when they stick to the traditional school age and refuse to take children a year earlier. Would not such a position be doomed to failure from the start?

This also brings up a hard question for the Waldorf kindergartens: How will life in the kindergarten be affected by this? How will it be when the group of oldest children—often called the “royal children” in Germany—are no longer there, because they have already gone on to elementary school? Would it not be much better pedagogically to continue to carry this age group in the kindergarten, but in a form specifically tailored to them? This might be done in such a way that from the outside it would look like an ordinary grade and involve elementary school teachers from a Waldorf school close by. However, in actual practice, such a class would be located in the trusted environment of the kindergarten. It would, of course, probably not be possible in every case to find the Waldorf school needed with which to cooperate, and even if that were possible, Waldorf schools often object, justly, that it would be necessary to institute a “grade zero” in order to be able to take in children who do not come from a Waldorf kindergarten. However, if there were such a grade zero, most of the five or six-year-olds (and their parents, respectively) would then likely want to press ahead from kindergarten into the “real school.” Instituting a transition class in the kindergarten would then be unnecessary,

unless the kindergarten were in the same location as the rest of the school. A multiplicity of fundamental questions such as these would arise.

With respect to the discussion concerning these issues, a discussion which has already started, the research group would like to stress that it does not consider it to be its task to find the right organizational form, imposed from above as it were, in order to meet the changed situation. Every institution will have to decide these matters for itself, taking into account the local conditions and individual possibilities. The research group should be working together with their colleagues to tackle the question of how to shape the transition pedagogically from early childhood into elementary school age. That is to say, how do we safeguard the developmental demands of the child when we shape a healthy and sensible transition, independent of the organizational form in which it takes place?

Hence it was of great importance for us to begin first of all by getting input from colleagues who are actually working with children between the ages of three and nine and to find out how they judge the present-day situation from a pedagogical point of view. The first results of our questionnaire give the following picture.

An Assessment of the Situation in the Kindergarten

From the questionnaire we sent out, we were able to incorporate results up to March 25, 2004. We received responses from a total of 153 early childhood educators from 126 German Waldorf preschools. It was especially interesting to notice the strong response to the question, “Have you noticed changes in child development during the past 10 years?” What follows is a summary of the most frequent responses.

- There is a noticeable decrease in children’s ability to imitate and to play and in the power of imagination.
- Children’s health is weaker, they are more nervous and fearful, and there is an increase in allergies and infections.
- In motor movement, there is less dexterity, a slowing in development, and more feebleness.
- Children play differently; they are louder and wilder.

- Children talk a lot, are slow to get going, and have a hard time listening.
- Today's children are very much individuals, strongly developed intellectually, and awake in their heads.
- They often have no sense of boundaries and are very much oriented towards adults; their capacity for devotion is less.
- Social skills and thoughtfulness can be counted on less.

It is noticeable that the enumeration of weaknesses and deficits predominates. The number of children having deficits such as the ones listed above is estimated to be very high (between 50 and 70 percent). A comparable list of new capacities, which can be valued positively, is generally absent. Are there none? Or should we have asked for them more explicitly?

Likewise, educators gave very differentiated answers to the question: "What would happen if children aged five and one-half to seven were missing from the group, because they would be attending a preparatory class or would be in elementary school?" The tenor of the answers was usually as follows:

- Younger children would miss the example of the older ones. Much would be missing in the way of child culture, stimulus for playing, and richness of ideas.
- Forming habits in the rhythm of the day and the course of the seasons, including also the carrying out of practical activities such as washing hands and dressing, would be much more difficult without the older children who remember how to do that. The grown-ups would have to demonstrate much more, or explain.
- It would only be beneficial for many children to have a third year in the kindergarten and thus remain longer in the activity of playing.
- It would increase the number of younger children in every group, which would mean a significant change in the structure of the groups; groups would be much more difficult to manage.
- A different opinion: there would be more peace and quiet in the kindergarten and the

little ones would be able to play more in an age appropriate way.

- Something would be taken away from the older children, and this would especially affect the great number who are only children. They would be missing out on the social practice of learning with and from the little children in sharing responsibility and developing care and empathy. They would not be able to feel pride about their own abilities, nor would the resulting strengthening of self-confidence be able to unfold.
- On the other hand, if the older children were in a group by themselves, they would not have to put up with waiting times. Special challenges could be arranged for them and they could be occupied with age appropriate activities (something which often is presently taking place in cases where special days or programs are arranged for the older children).

Early childhood educators in Waldorf kindergartens are predominantly of the opinion that the concept for the kindergarten as it has existed up to now would come into question if kindergarten no longer incorporated the five and six year-olds. This age group is seen as an essential part of the culture of the kindergarten, and its absence would mean disadvantages for all children. However, many kindergarten teachers and administrators feel the lack of a closer cooperation with the schools which take in their children, and they are worried that the input of early childhood educators would not be heard at all if preparatory classes were to be established.

How Do Things Stand in Elementary Schools?

We received forms with answers to our questionnaire from 84 German elementary Waldorf schools. In these, we likewise found that the question "Did you perceive general changes in child development during the past five years?" found a wide response.

Frequent observations were:

- There are still many "sound," healthy children, but the number of "unhealthy" children is increasing.
- Children have less dexterity than used to be the case. Coordination, fine and gross motor

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movements are less strongly developed (for example when children hop or stand on one leg).

- Illnesses are more frequent, children suffer pains, are pale, tired, or have indefinite bellyaches or headaches.
- The powers of imitation have waned. Even simple instructions are hard to follow for many children.
- The power of imagination has definitely become weaker.
- Concentration is bad; children have a hard time listening and their memories are weak.
- Children are restless; they cannot sit still.
- The sense of the rhythm is often weakly developed.
- The development of speech is often retarded (for example: a smaller vocabulary, use of shorter sentences, uncertainties in grammar, and retelling stories is becoming harder).

Not only were deficits noticed by teachers, but, in addition, a number of quite different, remarkable changes were registered as well.

- A much more individual approach has become necessary in the lower grades. There is a stronger need for personal attention, often connected with a lack of boundaries and a decrease in perception of social needs.
- The difference between boys and girls has become much more noticeable (90 percent of the difficult children are boys).
- When entering the school, many more children than before know their letters and can even read.
- Children show strong practical abilities, they want to be outside and want to have more time for play.
- Children are more spontaneous and open in their contact with the world. They are often sensitive, delicate, very awake, and also critical at this early age.
- They have a strong longing for spiritual matters and are often very spiritually oriented.

- They are more independent than they used to be, do not want guidance, yet look for orientation.
- “The Rubicon” (the developmental step in the ninth year, which involves the child becoming more distant towards the world) occurs earlier, as can be seen from the distance they show towards the teacher and also from related matters.

As in the case of the questionnaire for the early childhood educators, the teachers were likewise asked to consider how the lowering of school-age would affect their schools. What follows are typical answers given to the question “What, in your opinion, would the effect be for your school of lowering school entry to age five?”

- We find no positive aspects to the projected change and cannot assess how we would deal with it.
- We would be forced to establish a grade zero (a preschool or entry-level class). We would not be able to get around accepting five-year-olds.
- It would be necessary to collaborate more closely with the kindergarten.
- The traditional Waldorf kindergarten would have to be rethought and tackled in a different way.
- The curriculum we have used up to now would not apply to the school anymore, and it would be necessary to think of different educational concepts. (The model of the school in Bochum and team teaching were frequently mentioned.)
- The existing architectural layout of the school would no longer be functional and a complete remodeling would be necessary.
- It would be necessary to work with smaller classes and more therapeutic assistance would likewise be needed.
- Parental involvement would have to be intensified.

There was general unanimity in the conclusion teachers came to: we will not be able to avoid establishing preschool classes. It will entail new

pedagogical concepts; however, the necessary research will have to be done both by local school communities and on a regional level.

Preliminary Conclusions of the Questionnaire

It is clear that Waldorf schools are facing a new task: the transition from kindergarten to elementary school will have to be thoroughly rethought and shaped anew. On the surface, the point seems to be to find an organizational form which can meet the changed political requirements. Much more important, however, are the clearly stated grounds to turn our full energy towards this task for reasons which have nothing to do with political pressure. Again and again we are facing a host of well-known symptoms which are being reported in kindergartens and schools. All of them point to the fact that the constitution of present-day children has changed considerably. Children are different both in body and soul, and this is certainly to be connected with the changed circumstances created by adults (this, however, was not what the questionnaire was about). Children bring completely new conditions, demands, and problems into schools, newer than was the case 10 or 20 years ago, and therefore they need to be met pedagogically in a new way in order to do justice to our present time.

But how do we get there? Colleagues see three things which would be needed:

- 1) Collaboration between kindergartens and elementary schools must be much more intensive than has been the case up to now.
- 2) We must work at the pedagogical concepts, basing ourselves in proper research which takes into account how the human being develops and incorporates pedagogical and medicinal viewpoints.
- 3) Parents and teachers must work together more strongly.

Project 1: Pedagogical Model for Education between Age Three and Nine

The preliminary results of the questionnaire have reinforced the intention of the research group to

work together with the representatives of schools and kindergartens to create a pedagogical model that does not follow the traditional division between kindergarten and elementary school. Instead, the model should include the period going from the beginning of kindergarten up to the time of "The "Rubicon." In so doing, the development of the child from age three up to nine is seen as an ongoing process of formation and education.

In creating such a model, we have several targets in mind. On the one hand, it should offer *colleagues* who are working with this age group workable criteria based on real insight into child development, criteria which can serve to orient them in concretely shaping the transition from kindergarten into elementary school. On the other hand, it should offer *parents* criteria which clarify viewpoints coming out of Waldorf pedagogy, in order to help them make up their minds when they want to send their child to elementary school (insofar as they will still have the political freedom to choose in this matter). The third aim is that this research should make our viewpoints clear vis-a-vis the outside world. Several states are currently preparing educational models for early childhood education that will soon become anchored in law. Because of this, Waldorf kindergartens will see themselves, in the near future, faced with the necessity to formulate pedagogical models which are in harmony with their practices. This formulation of pedagogical aims will only be acceptable to the public when it is based on the latest scientific research. A work such as this cannot be accomplished by kindergartens on their own and therefore calls for a task force spanning the separate regions.

In the autumn of 2003, a larger group of colleagues from kindergartens and elementary schools came together and accomplished considerable preparatory work. It became more and more clear that the educational model we are striving for within the current political developments will only have the necessary weight and find acceptance when it is officially endorsed by the participating institutions and is formulated on their behalf. It is for that reason that we asked the boards of the German Waldorf School Association and the International Association for Waldorf Kindergartens to augment the existing working groups, which primarily work together on

a regional level, with competent representatives from the whole of Germany and thus lift the work to a federal level. We also asked the boards to give this total grouping a formal mandate to draw up the pedagogical aims, so that a document can come into being to which the whole of the Waldorf movement can adhere.

Project 2: Standardized Criteria For School Entry

In the second target area of the project, the research group seeks to investigate if it is possible to show scientifically whether there is a connection between the point at which a child enters school and the subsequent medical and educational history of that child. If so, can any conclusions be drawn from it? A considerable database will be needed to accomplish this, one which still has to be created by tracking the detailed development of as many children as possible at the point of school entry and comparing that data with later data. It should also be possible to compare this information with data collected from official bureaus of health.

The prerequisite for the validity of the data, however, is that the research be carried out according to standardized criteria, which is something new for German Waldorf schools. In order to accomplish this, Claudia McKeen has been working on a standardized research form and has placed this at the disposal of German Waldorf schools as a pilot project to be used by colleagues responsible for school entry in the various schools, with the request to incorporate and use the indicated research criteria in their own newly undertaken research into school readiness procedures. From the fullness of reliable criteria, we selected, in particular, those items which appeared to indicate strongly whether the vital forces shaping the body have become free or not. Some of the questions were taken from the research form used by the Board of Health in Cologne in order to facilitate comparison with official data at a later point in time.

We are also planning, in connection with project 2, a retrospective study, which will investigate the development and health of the youngest and oldest children in a given class. This project will have to incorporate data from as many classes as possible and span as many years as possible.

Project 3: Salutogenetic Research

The 3rd project area aims to do research to investigate the connection between the development of a healthy constitution and the educational process. First contacts are being made with experts in the field of epidemiology and with study leaders who have experience with scientific studies of this kind. In addition we are presently in touch with researchers of body rhythm, who have developed new instruments and methods that observe heart-beat-breath ratios. These observations could give us the ability to recognize subtle influences that affect children in school and to detect how definite, clearly definable activities, educational content and methods work to strengthen or weaken health. In contrast to the kind of long-term research which can only show a general correlation between health and educational methods, styles, and so forth, and is questionable in its methodology, this kind of study could lead to a direct and measurable correlation between a quite definite detail of education or of the instructional process and a strengthening or weakening of the health of the child. We hope to have a concrete plan with this intention in place in the next months.

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