

Focus on the Middle School – How do Methodological Approaches arise from the Anthroposophical Understanding of the Human Being? Part 1

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translated by Christian von Arnim

As it approaches its anniversary, Waldorf education faces existential questions: what are the inner and outer impulses with which this school movement approaches the next hundred years? In what way does the original spiritual impulse live in the reality of school today? And where are its vitality, figurative nature and power of imagination placed at risk in the encounter with normative learning systems and programmes?

"In 1922, in his lectures to the younger generation after three years of school practice, Steiner said: *'Waldorf education is not a system of education at all, but an art to awaken that which exists in the human being.'*"¹ Have we in the school movement after 99 years of development built up the capacity for self-criticism in such a way that we can describe the boundary between such awakening of what is individually human in lessons and the application of more general learning programmes?

Setting the Educational Course in the Middle School

The "interfaces" of our holistic form of school in particular reveal the tension between the influences of external standardisation and inner measures developed with the young people themselves in mind. Alongside questions about the school enrolment age and the period of the final exams, it is particularly the

Middle School in the transition from childhood to adolescence in the Upper School which is an important and necessary, but also sensitive interface. In the initiative group of the International Forum on education in the Middle School, colleagues from different countries described the challenges of this period of transition in the following words:

1. It is a developmental phase "in between the forces": vulnerable, sensitive, always "searching for something".
2. If the educational background of this developmental period is unclear, colleagues feel "unsettled" in the face of the great transformations.
3. Insecurity, expectations and demands can turn into a feeling of being under pressure: pressure from pupils, parents, colleagues.
4. Reactions vary: some teachers now "keep hammering at" the upcoming content to be seen to be doing the right thing. Others fall back on what has proved itself previously.
5. If the power of judgement is demanded with too much intensity, pupils can become "too old" too quickly. If childlike playfulness is continued for too long, the pupils remain "too young" for too long.

1 Rudolf Steiner, *Pädagogischer Jugendkurs*, 4 October 1922, p. 30. Published in English as *Becoming the Archangel Michael's Companions. Rudolf Steiner's Challenge to the Younger Generation*, SteinerBooks, 2006.

Even these few descriptions show the dramatic nature of this age. The great transformation in the development of the pupils demands a fundamental transformation of the lesson. The customary and familiar provides less and less support and every new methodological step means setting a specific course: the pivotal force between too early/too late, too firm/too easy and too standardised/too playful can only reside in the inner space of freedom of the teacher's personality. Thus in this period of change in particular, the connection between the quality of the image of the human being which the teacher carries within themselves and the steps applied in the lesson can be experienced at an existential level: access through the anthroposophical understanding of the human being to a comprehension of the pupils at this age becomes a guide and the basis of decision-making with regard to teaching methodology.

In this context we will look at what follows the birth of the astral body in the middle school period from two different perspectives in order thereby to develop questions about methodology.

What does the astral body do before it is born?

In a Class 7/8 we can experience the different and individual way in which the significant event, which we call the "birth of the astral body", takes place. It is possible, for example, that a girl who is among the older children in the class and has reached a certain maturity transforms herself in a teaching situation with a mighty jolt: her work rhythm which had supported her learning for many years – also for the benefit of the whole class – falls apart one morning with apparent sudden-

ness. In tears she tries to explain to her friend that she can no longer paint as she used to and no longer wants to. Nothing her fellow pupils, the teacher or her parents say can ease the pain of this inner fracture on the way to something new.

From this moment on she faces the world and also herself in a different way: what she previously accepted with joy and wonder is now questioned in a more serious and profound way. Other children, including many boys, pass through this inner fracture to a new development in a lengthy and often silent manner. In lessons, this can be noticed in the more questioning looks, the loss of the lightness of childhood in their movements, and gradually also in the nature of their questions and writing.

These signals indicate how much the personality of the pupil is transformed with the birth of the astral body. What does the astral body do *before* its "birth"?

Whereas the etheric formative forces are transformed on the eruption of the permanent teeth into the forces of learning and memory, the astral body is highly active in a different way in the years of school up to puberty: in all rhythmical experiences, in everything they hear, in making music, singing and speaking the child is thoroughly supported by the differentiating flexibility and mobility of the astral body. The astral body is the musician in the children. If it now begins to be released as described, the inner soul aspect is, we might say, "thrown out" into the world. Thus Steiner writes: "*With puberty, the human being is thrown out of the spiritual and soul life of the world and thrown into the external world ...*"²

2 Rudolf Steiner, *Die gesunde Entwicklung des Menschenwesens*, GA 303, p. 238. Published in English as *Soul Economy. Body, Soul, and Spirit in Waldorf Education*, SteinerBooks, 2003.

What was assimilated during the early years of school with a child's joy and devotion to music and rhythm, now has to be newly acquired by their own strength and effort. No wonder that the pupils at this age live in constant tension between being thrown out into the world and their inner emotional life and its search for orientation.

The growing power of thought and judgement which can provide orientation and support in this conflict now becomes very important. With regard to teaching methodology, this leads to the challenge to connect with the pupils' experience of the world and themselves on the one hand, and to open up conceptual connections on the basis of this experience on the other. In the context of the progression from "conclusion via judgement to concept" as set out in the ninth lecture of *The Foundations of Human Experience*, the experiences in physics and chemistry for example lead from the observational experience of the phenomena – the released astral body is an alert, active observer – through a description of what has been experienced to the identification of laws.

Etheric Heart and Astral Body as an Organ of the Middle

A completely different perspective on this period of the Middle School arises when we look at the connection of etheric and astral forces in the human heart. In the volume *The Human Soul in Relation to World Evolution*,³ Steiner describes the etheric and astral development of the school child above all as a transformation of their very own heart forces. He begins by describing the incremental individualisation of the etheric forces:

- On the way to birth, the unborn human being attracts the cosmic etheric forces to themselves. These forces help to form the body after conception.
- In the first seven-year period, these etheric "stellar forces" surround the child as they grow up in imitation.
- From the time of the eruption of the permanent teeth, these stellar forces from around the child radiate into their interior with all the child's individual learning, experiences and activities.
- With puberty, these etheric forces are concentrated in the heart.
- If the development of this, their own "etheric heart", is successful, the first, the inherited or "substitute" heart dissolves.

The educational importance of the individual development of the heart organ can be described in that it becomes a kind of new organ of the young person for the affiliation of their own being with the surrounding world as a whole. Just as this relationship echoes in the second morning verse, "*I look into the world, in which the sun is shining, ...*", so the individual etheric heart, developed over the years, becomes an organ of perception for this affinity.

The development of the astral body is directly connected with this etheric formative process: the former does not have its sources in the cosmic ether but carries everything within it which the developing human being brings along into life as abilities, qualities and goals. In this way, at the beginning of life, this astral body is still full of a wealth of

3 R. Steiner, *The Human Soul in Relation to World Evolution*, Spring Valley: Anthroposophic Press, 1984 (in German: GA 212).

individual things it has brought along. In the course of the years of childhood, growth and schooling, this wealth of aptitudes then moves down in the course of daily life, learning and work into the growth of the body, into acquired learning and skills. From a teacher's perspective, we then sometimes stand before the personality of a pupil and are amazed at what they have brought along into life. Or we ask: what other aptitudes still await to be developed?

On the path of incorporating the "old" aptitudes we have brought along, something completely new occurs at the same time: every movement made, every action of the young person is inscribed into the astral body from childhood onwards. Thus the astral body becomes an organ in which all the acts of will are collected and which becomes increasingly inwardly concentrated. During the time of the Middle School and puberty, this organ is consolidated specifically in the region of the heart and ultimately coincides with the etheric heart. This congruence is described by Steiner in the following words: *"Thus, from puberty a central organ is created wherein all our doing, all our human activity is centred. In the same region where the human being has their heart the sum total of all their activity is centralised, but in this case neither physically nor etherically, but astrally. The significant thing is that at the onset of puberty, [...] the human being's etheric heart is so prepared that it can take into itself the forces which develop from our activity in the external world."*⁴

This special constellation of the heart's connection with the world, the orientation towards the action of the central astral organ of the will, and the beginnings of judgement in thinking opens a special gateway of des-

tiny in the biography. It can be impressively experienced in the pupils of Class 8 in their profound questions, in the transformation of their fields of interest, and in the way they reflect on ideals.

Perspectives of Teaching Methodology in the Middle School

If we combine the constellation of this central organ, as discussed, with the birth of the astral body as described at the beginning, the nature of the pupils' openness towards and connection with the world in this developmental phase is revealed:

- With the release of the astral body, the young person existentially rediscovers themselves in their experience of the ebb and flow of external world events. They receive a first new foothold in their growing ability to think and form judgements.
- In the very individual vitality of their heart, developed out of their own biography, they can encounter the world in deep inwardness.
- Through this central astral organ they are profoundly connected both with the world and their innermost experience in every action and deed of their own.

If in Waldorf education we take the child's experience at their respective stage of development as a guide with regard to teaching and education, the characteristics we have just described will lead to questions of methodology: how can we accommodate the profound desire for the experience of, encounter with and understanding of the world in the lessons of the Middle School? How can we encourage to an even greater extent the

⁴ See note 3, p. 122.

power of the interest in and will to act for the world in the phases of learning? A fundamental key to these goals will lie in the nature of the posture and exploratory attitude which develops in the teacher when they regard the development described above. After all, school life often reveals that such an inner questioning attitude leads to the events in lessons themselves producing clues which encourage us to further steps.

Thus, here are a number of examples below which touch on such methodological moments of awakening:

In Geography in a Class 7, groups are formed to make a map of the world. In one group, a pupil describes the situation of animal species on the brink of extinction with such feeling that the group asks to investigate the subject further and subsequently contributes it to the production of the map as a whole.

During the "geometry of space" in a Class 8, a pupil is impressed by the "perfection" of the pentagon-dodecahedron. He resolves to use a workshop to build the shape out of aluminium rods for the classroom. The relationship between calculations, drawings and static problems in making the object and its (subsequently safe) mounting lead to new, unexpected learning experiences.

From that time onwards, that pupil started wherever possible to develop his own ap-

proaches and questions in the main lessons. When, in agreement with the class parents, an increasing number of independent experiments were undertaken on food and drink in a subsequent main lesson on the chemistry of food, this pupil focused his interest on a sugar beet factory nearby. He began to busy himself with research-like activity which ended, after a number of visits to the factory, with a presentation to the class of the whole manufacturing process. Both in terms of its content and in the attitude of interest towards the work, his presentation made a deep, sustained impression on the whole community.

It is self-evident that the lesson situations described here cannot be used like a recipe. In the first instance they can only point towards a greater focus on the world and doing in the methodology of the Middle School: where the will forces in harmony with inner experience were wholly focused on the world, inner and outer learning was able to develop new depths.

In order to deepen this question further, the Pedagogical Section conference on the anthroposophical understanding of the human being from 21 to 23 September 2018 will be wholly devoted to middle school development.

In Part II of this topic, the qualities of imagination in relation to teaching in the Middle School will be considered in the next *Journal*.