Overview of the Waldorf Grades

(Waldorf Teacher Resources)

1. In a Waldorf school, true academic work does not begin until first grade. Why? It is well known that the body renews every cell in itself every seven years. At about the age of seven, the child has literally become their own new self, and the completion of this work is symbolized by the change of teeth. The forces which were used to form the physical body are freed up and are now available to be used for memory. Academic work before this time is simply a drain on the child's resources which are designed for physical growth. One of the signs of first grade readiness we look for in a Waldorf school is that the child is able to imagine or think in pictures. Steiner calls this early form of cognition “knowledge via imagery rather than concepts." However, subject and object are not yet separated. The child still identifies with the images and this is reflected in how they are drawn to and engrossed in stories. In first grade, these stories are fairy tales and nature stories. Through nature stories, the teacher is able to imaginatively connect the child to the greater world and how nature works. Through fairy tales, the child is presented with an archetypal picture of the human being and the experiences and challenges met on his or her journey. The king, for example, is an image of each individual's spiritual essence, the I, or ego. Throughout the grades, we are concerned with the development of the child's capacities: academic capacities, capacities of love and compassion, and the capacities to fulfill one's destiny. As learning is tightly tied to development, the teacher needs to be aware of the individual student's developmental progress – is dominance established, can the child freely cross both horizontal and vertical midlines, etc. In our modern society, with its lack of movement and flood of media, many children are coming to first grade with a great many hindrances. Our job as educators is to help remove these hindrances, and the task at the beginning of first grade can seem daunting. Children are often unable to focus for very long. Impulse control may be lacking. Their nervous systems are often overloaded. They may have retained reflexes that contribute to learning difficulties. While there is no magic wand, in first grade we move! and move often. We attempt to hit all bases – teach to all learning types - visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Children may be stronger with details (left brain) or the whole picture (right brain). So we teach both whole to the parts (e.g. whole language) and parts to the whole (e.g. phonics). The task of the teacher is also to blend the many streams of society into one. Our society is in such a hurry and the pressure on Waldorf schools is enormous. We have numerous children coming into our first grade classes who are fully reading, while many don't yet know their letters. Both types of students can be met. What we are teaching in first grade are the foundation stones for learning. It's ok if children read at a second grade level, we can still present the letter "B" as the symbol adults use for the sound "buh". We feed their soul with imaginations of bears and butterflies – giving life to the soul amongst the ever encroaching intellectual landscape. Through bringing breathing into our lessons, alternating outer activity and focused work, we support the children developing rhythms which support better focus and clearer thinking. Through using three day rhythms, we use the sleep life to bring warmth to the intellectual material. Through loving our students and our daily meditations, we bring the essence of teaching – the spiritual insights and inspirations that are our gifts to our class. First grade is about potential and possibility - and beginning the journey to make these manifest.

2. The second grader is like a butterfly who has emerged from a chrysalis, and who is about to take their maiden flight. They still have the innocence of the young child. Their imaginations are fed with rich archetypal images and they live in the feeling realm which rises and falls on waves of sympathy and antipathy. In first grade, they experienced the world as a paradisal wholeness. In second grade they become aware of the duality of human nature, observing saintliness and mischievousness in themselves and others. The second grader is still not very far removed from their connection to spiritual world and they can still delight in its mysteries. Legends of the saints appeal to their moral sense of what is right and good and magical. Fables, on the other hand, provide an external view of our animal nature when pitted one against another. Our foibles are played out in the fables and the children can reflect upon them without judgment upon themselves. This allows them the space to exercise their own will and the possibility of their actions being guided by their "saintly" self.

Academically, the second grader is ready to work. Reading instruction establishes a firm foundation in phonics while continuing the emphasis on comprehension. In first grade, we began with sounds ('buh') which were represented by images of objects (bear). These sound pictures then became abstracted as they were represented by a letter ("B"). Further abstraction took place when the letters were used to form our introductory words. In second grade, we methodically explore the rules for combining these sound pictures to form words, and practice using these rules to decode the written word. We must also learn recognize those words which do not follow the rules. Second grade is a time when many students finally figure out the riddle of letters and learn to read. One student put it succinctly:

"So, reading is just you look at the letters and say what the sound is?"

The need for proper punctuation arises as we continue our work of putting speech on paper. Our beginning grammar study reveals there are different types of words: naming words (nouns), doing words (verbs), and describing words (adjectives and adverbs).

Math instruction builds upon our work in first grade. We rely less heavily on external objects to count and calculate and we move to more abstract mathematical operations. Times tables are memorized, place value is learned, and we begin carrying and borrowing.

3. Children come into this world trailing clouds of spiritual glory, but they must be disconnected from the Godhead and feel the separation from their pre-earthly home. Out of free will each person in their life has the opportunity to choose what is good and find their divine nature again.

The third grade is often called the turning point of childhood. The eight-year-old is going through a change that is particularly profound. Rudolf Steiner describes how the nine-year-old experiences, at a spiritual level, what the three-year-old experienced when first using the word "I". Before the age of nine, the major part of the child's being is not yet incarnated, and instead, it lives within everything and everyone they perceive. They feel inwardly related to everything, and can identify fully with almost anything. Now, however, an experience arises of self as something independent of everything else. Now the child may suddenly feel very insecure; their relationship with nature, with eternity, with others, and with themselves, has to be reestablished. Life certainly takes on quite a different quality.

This separation and search for one's true home is reflected in the journey of the Hebrew people as they leave the Garden of Eden and are presented with trials where they have the choice to do what is right or not. It is the beginning of individuation. Through our individual decisions to turn away from evil and choose the good, we attain virtue and progress in evolution as human beings. Just as fairy tales in the first grade, and fables and legends in the second grade, nourished children, so stories of the Old Testament form the treasury of sustenance for this year. With these stories comes an introduction to history. These powerful stories closely parallel the child's own experiences. He/she has left behind the "paradise" of early childhood and is becoming more aware of good and evil.

For the third grader, the remedy for being "cast out of Eden," is experiencing that the world is a good place to be. Through the activities of gardening, cooking, building shelters, and making clothing, they learn that they can use what is around them to thrive. They meet the earth around them and discover they have the power to transform it. There are skills they must learn. They learn to measure, to weigh, to use tools, to reap and sow crops, to make bread, follow the seasons, and keep time. With each skill learned, they gain comfort, confidence, and experience joy. The Earth is their home and it is good and beautiful.

6. *The harmonious balanced Greek period of childhood is ending and a willful, muscular Roman period is beginning. At this time, there is a false dawn of intellectual consciousness as the child’s feeling perception passes over to the world of ideas. This is not the same as the critical, independent thinking and judging that will come after the age of fourteen: it is instead a feeling approach to thinking.* Lois Cusick, “The Waldorf Parenting Handbook” When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, he left behind a life he never could return to. The sixth grader likewise has left the dreamy childhood consciousness and is entering awake adolescence. Although we might call their emerging intellect a 'false' dawn of intellectual consciousness, the sixth grader is none-the-less hungry to use their developing intellectual capacity. Our approach can be completely factual and grounded in the world while at the same time staying connected to the child and so relevant. We bring a formal introduction to phenomenological science: acoustics, optics, thermodynamics, magnetism, and electricity. Business math is introduced to create a practical context for formulas and other new mathematical concepts providing a transition to seventh grade algebra. In geometry, we transition from the world of free hand form drawing to the use of compass and ruler to create basic constructions. In language the students' writing is much more their own work. The five paragraph essay is introduced and the focus in writing shifts from what is being described to developing the techniques necessary to express the child's growing complexity of thoughts and feelings. History and geography bring a global perspective and Astronomy challenges them to expand their picture further into the cosmos. In summary, sixth grade marks the beginning of middle school and the teacher must be able to transform themself and teaching to meet these more demanding academic and social needs.

7. Seventh Grade marks the birth of the intellect with the need to experiment and explore the world. The thirteen to fourteen year old needs to question authority, pushing the boundaries of what is known or allowed. Powers of reasoning are being exercised and judgments about the world are formed. The child is developing the capacity to stand back from its own feelings and with this distance can come perspective, the beginnings of objectivity. The study of the Renaissance provides a backdrop for much of the seventh grade year, providing lessons in history, science, mathematics, geography, literature and art. The Renaissance artist wished to be recognized for his own work, the scientist challenged old truths with newly developed tools for measuring the world, the religious rebel rejected the dictates of authority and wished to know God directly. Likewise, the adolescent is driven by these forces. Meeting the adolescent's need for critical judgement, we are more exacting, focusing on measurement in math, science and art. We are hands on whenever possible, grounding concepts in the real world. Independent projects in the Renaissance and Age of Exploration are a means for the student to go deeper into a subject of interest. Language exercise and drama explore the realm of human feeling.

8. O*ne of the principles in the Waldorf School is to educate young people so that, on the one hand, they can bring to the fore in the right way the whole of their human potential, and, on the other hand, what they need to enable them to take their proper place in the world* Rudolf Steiner, A Modern Art of Education, Lecture of August 15, 1923 Eighth grade is the crowning year of the Waldorf grade school. It is an opportunity to bring forth the many seeds planted and the sky's the limit with regard to what can be achieved. I set my sights high and paved a path for the students that, while arduous, gave them the experience that, "I am capable and can do whatever I set my sights on." This is a transformative year, and the students should feel that they have experienced a right of passage when graduating. The adolescent brings a true birth of the intellectual consciousness. Conversations at all levels are possible. The academic curriculum should be rigorous. History and literature (novels) are brought from the 19th century to the current age. Algebra 1 is tackled to the capability of each child. Students write their own short stories. Political and social topics are debated. Chemistry and physics become more measurable and objective. Beyond the academic curriculum, I chose four significant experiences for the year: • Independent Study Project & Presentation • Class Play • Class Trip • Graduation