

New perspectives on development

The problem 1.

Remo Largo:
individual development
is normal

The teacher with a class of twenty, six-year-olds will see differences of up to three years in the children's developmental ages. Some children will have a developmental age of 7 to 8 years and will read at the age of six, whilst others have a developmental age of 4 to 5 and struggle with reading. Before children reach the upper school, the differences between them tend to increase markedly... At age 13, the developmental ages of the furthest and least developed children diverge by at least 6 years. In addition, boys – as a group – tend to lag behind girls by 18 months on average. Dealing with such 'inter-individual variability' can be a challenge for parents and teachers (2012, P. 18).

Entwicklungsalter in Jahren	Anzahl Kinder
4.5	1
5	2
5.5	4
6	6
6.5	4
7	2
7.5	1

INTERNATIONAL
CAMPUS
WALDORF

The implications

For the nature of child and youth development

- Individual variation and diversity are normal,
- heterochronous development is normal,
- learning groups are always heterogeneous.

Therefore

- the assumption that there are universal steps of development can be contested;
- fine-grained, year-by-year depictions of the 'typical' grade 3 or grade 7 child, are at best misleading, at worst harmful...because they are normative and may lead to the assumption that a child not conforming to the developmental description is somehow abnormal, leading to perceptions of 'problematic' or 'difficult' children (see Knight, 2019, Dyer, 2019).
- high stakes testing such as school readiness tests/assessments based on age impact on biographies and prevent 'child-ready' pedagogy,

- Studies by Idel (2013, 2014) show that 25% of former Waldorf students felt that their class teacher did not recognize and accept them because they did not conform to their 'romantic' notion of development

Implications for curriculum:

- Year-by-year correlations between child development and curriculum content cannot be justified by assumption about universal development.
- Thus, the idea of a universal curriculum content can be contested.

Problem 2: Other critiques

E.g. criticism of Waldorf 'image of the child'

Through analysis of ethnographic evidence from Shining Star Daycare and Waldorf education documents from Rudolf Steiner and others, I have shown that Waldorf education reproduces many of the key assumptions of the conventional approach to early childhood education predominant within US society. Through a child-centered model that views the individual needs, desires, and actions of the child as central to the pedagogical process, Waldorf education—like conventional early childhood education in the United States—reifies the Western, White, middle-class ideal of the “mythic ‘walled garden’ of ‘Happy, Safe, Protected, Innocent Childhood’” of Holt’s analysis. Waldorf education romanticizes the young child as vulnerable and in need of protection, particularly from the dangers of media, cognitive overstimulation, and adult sexuality. While Waldorf education may appear to be child-centered in the sense of retaining a focus on play, in reality only certain types of play are sanctioned and viewed as evidence of “normal” development.

This universalization of children’s development and experience becomes problematic because “the construction of childhood actually reifies those who are younger into simple predetermined entities who are to be regulated, denying their human complexities and ambiguities, and their right to be heard and respected as equal human beings” (Cannella, 1997: 158). As Steiner (along with conventional developmental psychology) constructed childhood in universalizing ways, they missed the complexity of childhood and the right of children’s voices to be heard alongside those of adults. Constructing a prototypical child, Cannella (1997) and Lubeck (1996) argue, reifies the White, middle-class form of childhood while silencing the experiences and perspectives of children whose development does not look or feel the same.

Waldorf education, while claiming to be child-centered, ultimately relies on more teacher-directed methods than they would originally appear to proclaim. Child-centeredness in this case, therefore, is ultimately not about child empowerment and liberation. Instead, it is about creating and reifying a particular type of child, and then regulating children in a way that fits the White, middle-class model of safe, innocent, and protected childhood. If early childhood education, both conventional and alternative, is to become truly focused on the goal of social justice, then definitions of childhood and child-centeredness must be broadened to include all possible pathways of development, not just the White, middle-class version. As Cannella (1997: 165) argues, “to hear younger human beings, we must challenge our conceptions of them as the Other, those who are heard only within the constructions that we have created of them, or those who cannot speak for themselves.” This requires moving from a notion of child-centeredness to a notion of child liberation. Such a vision can only be crafted in collaboration with, rather than on behalf of, children from all walks of life.

Wilson (2014)

Waldorf education often reflects the cultural attitudes and individual assumptions of its practitioners.

Hunter Knight (2024)

ABSTRACT

How do assumptions about where children naturally belong reinforce colonial productions of the human? This paper presents research from a study examining how North American Waldorf educators navigated the colonial legacies of common-sense understandings of childhood. I focus on the ideas about childhood that emerge in a belief that Waldorf kindergartens are ideal places for children. The pedagogical space of the Waldorf kindergarten is built on intuited assumptions about children being close to nature, family, and home. I bring together childhood studies and anti-colonial theory to argue that these assumptions are not neutral or ahistorical, but instead originate in colonial stories of the human structured by settler geographies. This paper explores how relying on these assumptions ultimately meant that participants had to negotiate the racism and ableism embedded within their origins, illustrating larger implications for other educators who navigate dominant Western understandings of childhood that organise pedagogy and pedagogical spaces.

'Little House on the Prairie went to Stockholm on vacation'...This captures the ways in which the wooden, light-filled room draped in pink fabric has what might be called an elevated settler aesthetic. (Knight, 2024)

The fancy-log-cabin feeling illustrates the ways in which this space organises a pedagogy for a child can experience progressive growth from nature into the white, settler-coded space of the Waldorf kindergarten-as-home. The Waldorf kindergarten's evocations of nature, family, and home are a visual evocation of a very specific story of childhood. This space feels intuitively true not because of objective facts about where children naturally belong, but because it matches how the child is temporally and geographically figured into the progression of Man. This space intentionally evokes a North American construction of identity development in the manner that it reiterates narratives of settler dominance in facilitating movement through uncivilised space to reach the civilised space beyond (Razack 2002). The ways in which the pedagogical space connotes this path through references to nature and to family/home is exactly what makes it feel to so many educators like the perfect place for childhood. This means that disabled children or children of colour who resist nature or who have different organisations of home just seem to have a hard time finding space.

In term of Waldorf aims to be inclusive and diverse - the above concerns are important to take seriously.

“Across Turtle Island, Indigenous children, Black children, and children of color are disproportionately likely to be given a stigmatizing disability label, drop out of school, and/or enter juvenile prison” (Knight, 2019).

Importance of studying theories of childhood in teacher education

(e.g. key texts such as Arièl (1962) *Centuries of Childhood*, Elkind, (1987) *The child yesterday, today and tomorrow*, Shute & Slee (2015) *Child Development: theories and critical perspectives*).

Key ideas include:

- Childhood is relatively recent concept and youth/adolescence even more recent.
- Childhood is a cultural construct that varies over time and cultures- even today.
- Child psychology is a question of epistemology (how do we know?) and is multidisciplinary: biological/neuroscience approaches, question of morality and ethics, sociology, wellbeing, learning theory, linguistics, social anthropology and ethnology, geography...and pedagogy.

Core questions of child/youth develop include:

- Who or what develops?
- What do we mean by development?
- What is the relationship between learning and development?

Steiner’s understanding of development

- A process of incarnation and excarnation over a sequence of lifecourses, and within a single earthly lifecourse
- Spiritual core of individuality -das Ich (Self) engages through *embodiment* with the genetically inherited body, *socialization* through family, community, society and *enculturation* within culture, medial environment, through educational *qualification* - with the aim of bringing the spiritual intentions of the Self to expression through *individuation*.
- Steiner used the idea of recapitulation for cultural evolution and in very general terms human ontogeny – upright walking- speech- thinking. But he refuted the idea of recapitulation of consciousness in the child:

“When we observe the early developmental years of a child, we find nothing that indicates a recapitulation of the subsequent stages of human development. We would have to attribute fantasy forces and processes to the child’s development to find something like that. It is just a beautiful dream when people like Wolf try to demonstrate that children go through a period corresponding to wild barbarians, then they go through the Persian period, and so forth. Beautiful pictures can result from this, but it is nonsense nevertheless because it does not correspond to any genuine reality.”

Rudolf Steiner, *Renewal of Education* GA 301,1920, lecture 4, p.73-74

- The pedagogical response process of individuation is organized into (hebdomatic) 7-year life phases, each subdivided into three emphases.

will	feeling	thinking	will	feeling	thinking	will	feeling	thinking	
0	2 1/3	4 2/3	7	9 1/3	11 2/3	14	16 1/3	18 2/3	21

„Rubicon“

physical birth birth of life body birth of soul body birth of “I”

WILL

FEELING

KNOWLEDGE

learning based on imitation

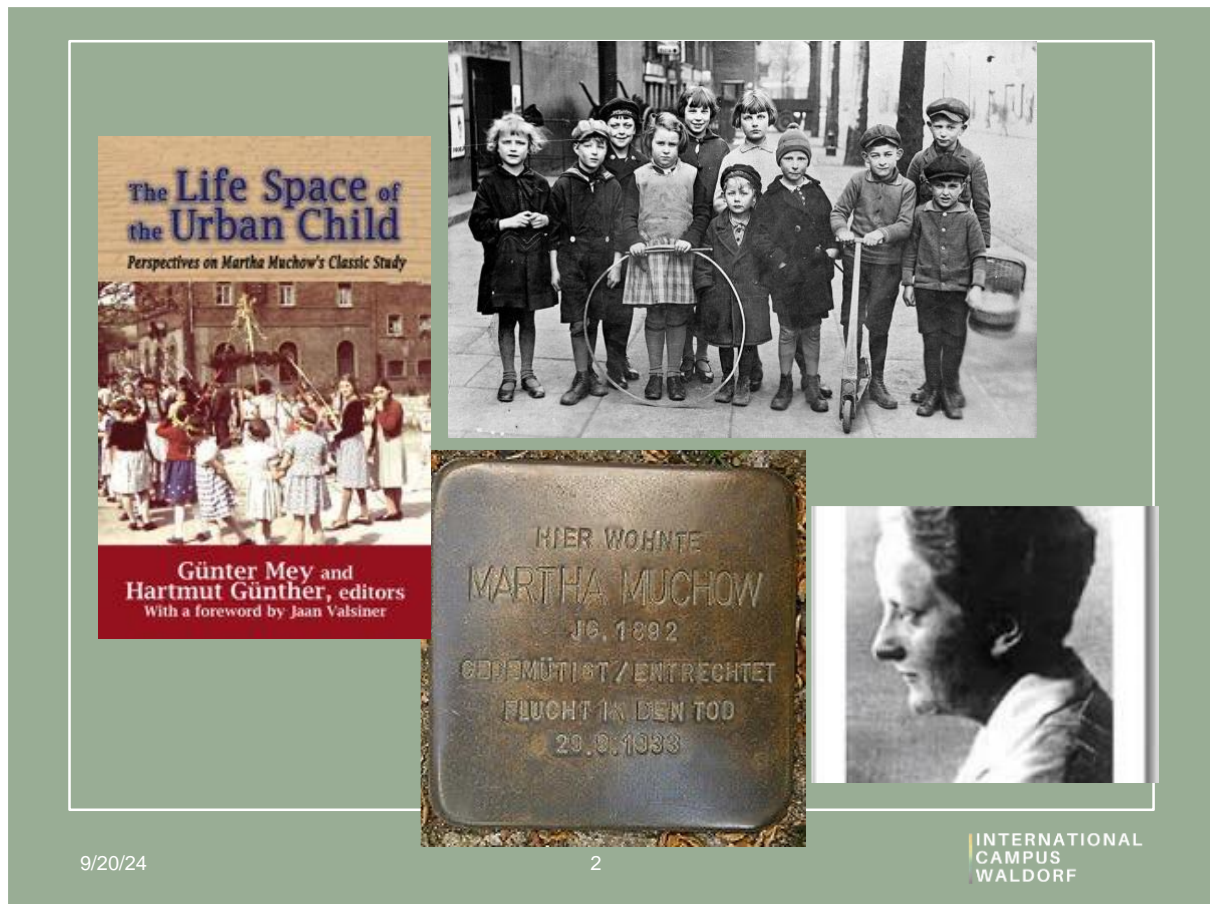
learning based on authority (rhythm and aesthetics)

forming independent judgments and concepts

- Michael Zech (2011) has shown that Steiner’s hebdomatics was never intended to be a model of reality but as an ideal-typical heuristic.
- Steiner used the term ‘*ideal-curriculum*’ and related this to the ideal developmental steps. In both cases the key term is ‘ideal’- i.e. not real but a theoretical frame of reference.
- Steiner distanced himself from other reform-pedagogy ideas, but the relationships to early Herbart, Pestalozzi, Froebel, etc. are actually quite close. He generally rejected contemporary psychology (Brentano, Dilthey, Stirner, William and Clara Stern, Charlotte Bühler and Martha Muchow) because it did not explicitly acknowledge the spiritual, but there are many overlaps. He rejected ‘socialist’ educational models as materialist (though pioneers such as William Stern, Lev Vygotsky made significant contributions). He did like Margaret McMillan’s (Christian Socialist) approach in England.

Martha Muchow (1892-1933) is an interesting example:

- Hamburg, elementary school teacher
- Student of William Stern, PhD with Stern and Ernst Cassirer („Psychology of the Educator“), she published 71 academic papers,
- first critique of Montessori (comparison with Froebel),
- Major research work- *The Life Space of the Urban Child* (in Barmbek, HH).
- Ecological child development, the development of the whole person, children’s agency, children are not only shaped by environment, but shape it too, geography of perception, phenomenological method of child observation.
- Took her own life when Nazi’s came to power and took over the research institute.
- She demonstrated that a combination of teachers, researchers, teacher associations, local education authorities could bring significant benefits to many poor and working-class children (compare with Waldorf at elite margins....)



- Steiner can be seen as an original pioneer of youth studies and the creator of a specific youth pedagogy.

A new (benign critical) Waldorf approach: Steiner +105

- We can re-visit and re-define what a contemporary Waldorf developmental psychology looks like, and position this in relation to other theories and practices- but this requires a *benign critical approach*.
- This requires a repositioning of Waldorf education in relation to anthroposophy (e.g. Jost's talk last week), or it will continue to lose momentum (and teachers).
- Waldorf has some vital unique aspects but lacks a comprehensive theory and practice of development based alone on Steiner.
- But it is capable of developing new approaches (e.g. curriculum, learning theory, inclusion and diversity)

A new Waldorf approach to child and youth development is based on,

- The core of Steiner's pedagogical anthropology is the acknowledgement and practical consideration of the spiritual dimension and the notion of individuation (spirituality is a fully recognized aspect of human development with several international peer-review journals).

- Other insights into development and learning that take a holistic view of the human being and are compatible with Steiner’s anthropology.
- All human beings are unique and engage in common developmental tasks in individual ways.
- Steiner’s ideas are used heuristically and as boundary ideas (i.e. anthroposophical ideas are used as a lens to explore pedagogical phenomena- leading to the growth of new dispositions that extend the boundary of our knowing).
- Development is understood as permanent change in the whole human being towards becoming a person-in-the-world.
- Learning is the motor of development- curriculum provides learning opportunities.
- Development is ecological and occurs in a context that affords it.
- Aim of development is *ecological agency* i.e. autonomous individuals who act in ways that enable others to become free and who respect the natural world.

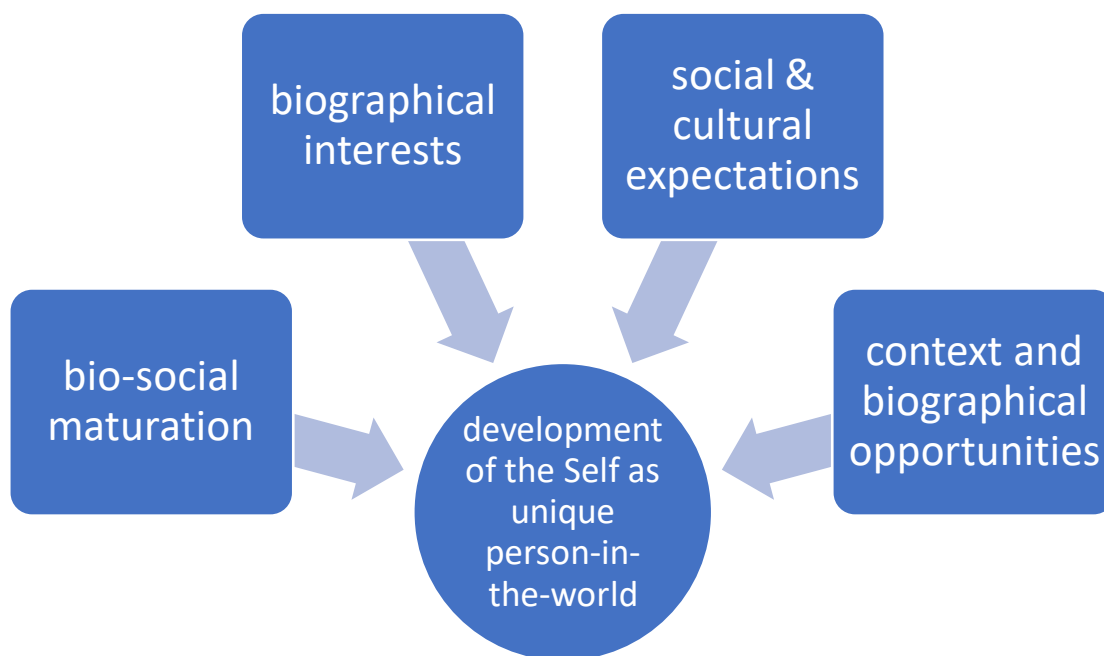


Figure 1 New Waldorf reading of developmental tasks

A developmental curriculum

Curriculum responds to the developmental tasks by providing a sequence of learning opportunities that prompt development. A layered curriculum offers:

- Meta level: generative principles of Waldorf education based on developmental theory,
- Macro level: a generally accepted sequence of developmental themes an ideal-typical pathway,
- Meso level: culturally specific content leading to knowledge and skills that enable both national and world citizenship,
- Micro level: teachers shape learning opportunities to the needs of specific students and learning groups.

New Waldorf is:

- aligned with contemporary Bildung theory (Biesta, 2022)
- closer to indigenous epistemologies than to reductionist neuroscience models and AI.

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