

Transitions as Developmental Dynamics between Dissolution and Re-Birth

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Starting from birth, there are three different streams mutually permeating each other in the child's development :



- If we observe a small child, we are amazed to see how it expresses its inner being through its movements, gestures, sounds, gaze and facial expressions.
- These lively expressions emerge from the innermost core of the child and are closely connected to the growth of the organism; there is harmony between soul qualities and physical development.
- The small child can be seen as one complete sense organ; this is the reason why it absorbs all external sensory impressions entirely, and, by the power of imitation, is deeply connected with its surroundings.

These three aspects permeate each other and it is at this interaction point where the child develops day by day. The spiritual element radiates outwards towards the soul and is thus closely connected to the physical body and its surroundings. However, despite all the movement, we also notice phases of consolidation within the child's temporal development. In these phases, the child incorporates new experience and recently acquired skills into an existing framework, and by doing so, the experience in turn strengthens the child. -

So, on the one side we see phases of consolidation, but on the other side we observe dynamic phases of metamorphosis which strongly influence the child's development. New, unsettling impulses lead the child into transitional phases with their own dynamics of transformation, but also sensitivity and insecurity. The intention of the Teachers and Early Childhood Educators Conference that will take place just before Easter in 2015, is to explore the qualities, dangers and possibilities of these phases of transition and re-birth.

**Transitions in Childhood from Birth to 14
Significance, Challenges and Consequences**
*-Tasks for Teachers and
Early Childhood Educators -*
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The conference is organized by the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum and IASWECE (International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education)

Anthroposophical Perspectives on Transitions

There is a dynamic relation between the changes and turning points in child development and working with and on the study of the human being through Anthroposophy. Let us first consider the three stages of metamorphosis described by Rudolf Steiner at the end of Lecture Three in *Supersensible Physiology and Balance in Teaching* (21st September 1920): - Consciously taking in and perceiving in the study content, - meditatively and repeatedly working it through in order to "digest" and deeply understand it, - and, as a third step, remembering this anthropological psychology during our teaching activity, which leads to new, creative impulses. To summarize, we can connect these three stages with the following qualities:

- Studying Anthroposophy,-
conscious thinking perception
- Meditating Anthroposophy-
Repeated intimate contemplation
- Remembering Anthroposophy-
Creating new impulses in our deeds

At the moments of transition from one developmental step to the next, when the child changes on the inside and outside, we are faced with the challenge of moving from stage one to stage two of the process described above: How do we achieve the transition from ordinary conceptual thinking and outer observation to a more mobile way of thinking? The child's inner being brings forth metamorphosis, and we can only discern this inner being, if our cognition becomes "fluid," as it were. If this does not happen, then there is a danger that we remain on the level of superficial observation. Thus Rudolf Steiner encourages teachers to develop a refined and precise way of viewing such transitional moments.

"These changes are mentioned, it is true, but only as they affect the actual physical body of the child or are expressed in the soul's more superficial dependence on the physical body. Consequently, people have little to say about the important changes that have occurred in the child's whole physical organization, such as those that happen at the change of teeth, at puberty and again after the twentieth year. This would require much more delicate observations."

(Steiner, R. *The Roots of Education*, Lecture 2, Berne, 14. April 1924. First published in English in 1968 (translator unknown). Revised by Helen Fox in 1982.)

Rudolf Steiner describes a series of exercises for developing such observational capacities. They follow a certain pattern: Through inner effort and mobility, the distance between ordinary thinking and that which is observed can be overcome, so that true intimacy and deep understanding arise.

"These exercises are based neither on superstition nor merely on fantasy, but on clear thinking and deliberation as exact as that used for mathematics. They lead human beings to develop a capacity for thought in a much more vital and active way than that found in the abstract thinking of people today. [...] Once we have condensed and concentrated our thoughts by means of the exercises mentioned, we

experience spirit in such a way that we no longer have the abstract feeling, which is so prevalent today, that objects are far from us. We get a true sense of them that arises from practiced, concentrated thinking."

(Ibid)

Exercises for observation and imagination as a bridge to active, vital thinking

Let us consider the so-called "cloud exercise" as described by Rudolf Steiner in *Practical Training in Thought*. He suggests to carefully observe some phenomenon at a certain time of day, for example, cloud formations at sunset. The observation should be retained in one's memory so strongly that the picture is preserved in all its details.



Painting by Emil Nolde (1867 –1956)

The next day, the cloud formations are observed at roughly the same time. Thus, over the course of several days, a series of concise cloud formation images is built up. We do not interrupt the connection to the phenomenon with quick, intellectual interpretation or speculations but rather try to increase our awareness and retain as much detail as possible.

If we achieve an intimacy with the reality of the clouds, then we can try, as a next step, to merge the pictures into each other, from one day to the next. There is a twofold movement within this process: First, to avoid any speculation, we focus our attention completely on the phenomenon and retain it through our inner activity. Then we consciously seek to move from one cloud picture to the next, as is inherent in the nature of clouds. This movement emerges from the clouds themselves and is not invented by us.

After some repetition, this exercise leads to:

- higher awareness
- awareness of quick, speculative thinking
- trust in the conceptual unity of phenomena
- mobile thinking which is closer to the reality of the processes

These effects are possible because worldly processes imprint themselves, through intense inner activity, upon the astral or sentient body and thus also upon the ether or life body.

„To the extent we insert ourselves into the course of the world through observation of the events in the world and receive these images into our thoughts with the greatest possible clarity, allowing them to work within us, to that extent do those members of our organism that are withdrawn from our consciousness become ever more intelligent. If, in the case of inwardly connected events, we have once acquired the faculty of letting the new picture melt into the preceding one in the same way that the transition occurred in nature, it shall be found after a time that our thinking has gained considerable flexibility.“

(Steiner, R. *Practical Training in Thought*. Karlsruhe, 18. January 1909. Translated by Henry B. Monges)

Here, Steiner describes a training in thought and observation which we can also find in the world view of Goethe. It does not take place outside objects and phenomena, but within the core of the life processes.

The Child in Transition in the Third Year of Life

Bearing in mind the above, let us now consider the transitional phase at the age of three: The child's senses are still very much open, just as they were in earliest childhood; this can be seen in moments when the child is completely lost in perception as in the following situation:

In late autumn, the child watches in awe as an adult is pushing a wheelbarrow full of dry leaves. Next day, the child pushes her own little wheelbarrow full of dry leaves alongside the adult. The child is comfortably absorbed in imitation. The adult needlessly comments on the child's action by saying: "It's really nice that we are both pushing our wheelbarrows today." These direct words interrupt the child's active will. She stands still and says decidedly, "both of us – and me!" Then, she carries on with the work.

A few days later, there is a second incident:

Walking through town, the child recognizes the streets; she realizes that she is close to the market square and suddenly wants to go there. The mother, however, wants to go somewhere else and the child protests angrily, "No! No! I don't want to go there!" The child is seized by a strong will which shows itself to the point of stamping and shaking. (Unfortunately, most adults have lost the ability to say "no" with such vehemence.)

A short while after the third birthday, there is a new phase - the transitional period described earlier:

After a moment of contemplation, the girl asks with a serious expression: "Mama, how does God make hair grow? Does he sprinkle some seeds on the head?"

In summing-up, the three incidents can be described as follows:

- The will to imitate is interrupted for a moment and sparks an instant of self-consciousness
- Anger flares up in a moment of defiance and self-assertion
- The child imaginatively weaves two pictures into a question

We understand the dynamics and relevance of the transitional phase better if we now try, from the child's perspective, to merge one image into the next: The child is still utterly devoted to her surroundings, however, this devotion is interrupted from time to time, in varying degrees, by an emerging self-consciousness. During peaceful, quiet moments, the emerging self-awareness turns inward and new questions arise.

These are relevant for the child within her new relationship to the world and often appear as imaginative pictures. The parents have the impression that the quality of the earlier, natural devotion and imitation has changed: Out of the inner will, little by little, self-consciousness and self-awareness emerge. This first feeling of self-awareness expresses itself in various ways during the transition period. There are moments of quiet contemplation, moments of energetic action and sudden outbursts of anger.

The above depiction leads to a deeper understanding of the three-year-old and, as an inner consequence, shows the way forward: The child's own strong powers of development can unfold best when parents and teachers don't interfere directly, but rather when they create imaginative surroundings worthy of imitation including:

- movement and purposeful activities
- clear speech
- true and sincere human encounters
- artistic and musical activity, whenever possible
- a loving, understanding view of the true being of the child, as it emerges step by step

Rudolf Steiner sums up the meaning and responsibility of the educator's attitude with the words,

“We have to be aware that we cannot influence the child with words of advice or by setting rules but only by what we do in the child's company.”

(Steiner, R. *Erziehung zum Leben*. Amsterdam. 28. February 1921. GA 297. (No published English translation available.)

The child as the basis for education and curriculum

The child's maturation can be experienced in the transition periods, when the child changes, when new forces grapple with existing ones and the young person is seeking safety on diverse levels. The more closely educators understand the child's true being, by way of observation as described above, the more agile their observation and thinking become, the more sensitively and clearly they will be able to find appropriate educational responses from the child itself.

„Practising living thinking will create new life-forces when one is dealing with growing children, even if there may be a whole crowd of them in one class. Only in this way will the teacher learn to recognise the children's inner needs, so that he can create the lessons and the entire curriculum in order to satisfy them.“

Steiner, R. *The Renewal of Education*. 26. April 1920. GA 301. Translated by Robert F. Lathe and Nancy Parsons Whittaker



Work of the adult in the child's company: outdoor activity in a Waldorf kindergarten in Armenia.

In this sense, the term curriculum does not describe a complete program, but rather the realization of what the child needs for his or her development. If the educators implement what they perceive as the child's need, then a kinship grows between development and activity; this kinship has strengthening and encouraging significance. I want to describe the “reading” of the child a bit closer now, focusing on various phases during the change of teeth at the age of six or seven. Let us start with the kindergarten teacher's perspective:

It is early summer and all the children are putting their wellington boots and coats on to go outside. While the teacher is helping some of the younger children, two boys are standing by the door, uncharacteristically hesitant. The older one, who's already lost some teeth, says, “Let's go to the shed and talk about lightning and such!” He starts to run and the younger one follows. Towards midday, they both sit quietly and watch the puppet show. The younger one is quickly absorbed in the images of the enacted fairy tale while the older one shifts between serious, wakeful, questioning expressions and complete immersion.

When the teacher hears the words of the older one she remembers other, recent incidents: How he withdrew from games, the lengthening of his body, the look of suspense and the emerging of the second set of teeth. All this creates an overall image of deep transformation. She becomes aware how new, strong impulses arise from deep within and change his experience of the world. Rudolf Steiner describes this kind of transformation:

„The remarkable physiological conclusion of childhood, [...] when hardening makes it final push and the permanent teeth crystallize out of the human organism. It is extremely interesting to use spiritual scientific methods to look at what lies at the basis of the developing organism, what forms the conclusion, the change of teeth. However, it is more important to follow what I have just described, the parallel spirit-soul development that arises completely from imitation.

Around the age of seven, a clear change in the spirit-soul constitution of the child begins. We could say that at this age the capacity to react to something quite differently than before emerges. Previously, the child's eye was intent upon imitating, the child's ear was intent upon imitating. Now the child begins to concentrate upon what adults radiate as opinion, as points of view.”

(Steiner, R. *The Spirit of the Waldorf School*. 27. November. 1919. Stuttgart. GA 297.

Translated by Robert F. Lathe and Nancy Parsons Whittaker)

When the teacher and her colleagues discussed this particular boy and the way he had changed, they visualized his position in a kind of “tidal zone”, between imitation, which still gave him a sense of security, and the impact of his new self-awareness. The encounters with the boy and the contemplation of his position helped the teacher to develop a new attitude towards him: She addressed him with clearer words and gave him new tasks and responsibilities within the daily kindergarten routine. It was clear for everyone involved that he was ready for school. For the younger boy, the decision to let him start school was only taken in May, when his teeth start to change and new skills emerged. After a further three months marked by more changes, both boys were admitted to grade one.



New tasks and responsibilities for the six-years -old child: Impressions from Waldorf kindergartens in China and India

The transition of the seven year old: a battleground for diverging forces

Let us now look at the transition period, described above, from the perspective of teaching.

A few days after the start of the school year, the new grade one children happily enter the classroom. All eyes are on the teacher. The children are engrossed by her words which lead them to the choral recitation of the morning verse and further on to singing. This is followed by a few chosen words from a longer verse. It seems that the teacher's language opens a gate through which the children enter into their own world of imagination. The teacher now adds some gestures to the verse, these are readily imitated by the children. They become one with the language, rhythms, imagination and movements. The younger boy described above is still very much absorbed by the pictures and copies the teacher's gestures out of a childlike, subconscious will to imitate. The older boy seems more awake and picks up some of the subtle nuances of the gestures. His speech is also more purposeful; he pronounces individual sounds with more certainty. Later, the teacher asks the children for their memories of yesterday's fairy tale; the older boy remembers the pictures and actions of the story with ease.

As a notable tendency, the teacher experiences the children's increasing need to transform their outer abilities and skills into new, inner ones during the first few weeks of school:

- a profound listening to the words of the adults
- the harmony between beautifully spoken words and carefully led movement
- imaginative inner pictures
- ability to be absorbed in stories
- remembering what was told or happened the previous day
- independent execution of tasks

The sum of these emerging inner soul qualities describes the re-birth of the etheric forces that free themselves from the connection with the child's physical growth. With the help of careful observation and daily reviews, the teacher now becomes aware of what the children are looking for and need day by day. She thus understands and realizes the inner curriculum for this age group. Furthermore, she develops a more and more finely tuned perception of the children's individual differences. To the individual eye, the time of transition presents itself as a battleground for existing and newly emerging forces: The older boy is drawn to the new inner soul quality of imagination and memory; he needs to be encouraged to join in schoolyard games and to physically move enough. The younger one, on the other hand, who still runs, jumps and plays a lot, needs powerful stories and strong pictures to find his way to inner resonance which will eventually lead to the ability to remember. Rudolf Steiner describes this inner battle between existing and emerging forces:

„Then those forces which come newly into being in the body as soul-forces begin to be active with the seventh year - [...] And then what radiates upwards from the body is repulsed, whereas the forces that shoot downwards from the head are checked. Thus at this time, when the teeth are changing, the severest battle is fought between the forces, [...] the forces that later appear in the child as the reasoning and intellectual powers, and those that must be employed particularly in drawing, painting, and writing.“

Steiner, R. *Balance in Teaching*, 16. September 1920. Stuttgart. GA 302a. Translated by Ruth Pusch

The qualities of the transitional period around the age of six and seven can be summed up as follows: comparing this phase with the changes in the three-year-old child, we see a more complex picture now. The early abilities for growth and imitation are transformed, but at the same time they remain side by side with new forces: Continuation, liberation, transformation and re-birth completely permeate the young person, the inner spiritual aspects as well as physical growth.

The child's individuality is the conductor of these complex processes. On the one side it moves deeply into the physical body but at the same time it opens up completely new possibilities for the soul. The child's individuality now faces the teacher's individuality on an increasingly conscious level: we will discern the child's true being if we improve our ability to think in fluid, perceptive ways and thus incorporate various perspectives and observations in one bigger picture. The complexity of the child's transformation at the age of six and seven forms the basis for Steiner's description of spiritual cognition in *Balance in Teaching*.

„In spiritual science there is no other way to present characterizations than by approaching a matter from different sides and then observing simultaneously the different resulting aspects. Just as little as a single tone can comprise a melody can a spiritual-scientific content be contained in a single characterization. This must be done from different angles.“

(Ibid)

If we indeed achieve to describe, and deeply understand, a child's or a group's melody of development based on a series of observations, then we may learn to read therein the true curriculum and implement it in distinct educational steps.

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