Waldorf Working Papers Nr. 10

Rethinking and restructuring Waldorf curricula: an ongoing process

Kath Bransby and Martyn Rawson

Introduction

Can one re-imagine and re-frame a work of art? Can we fill in the gaps in Shakespeare's plots, tidy up Rembrandt's Night Watch and make the Disciples at Leonardo's Last Supper more culturally representative? Can a work of art be upgraded, updated, even de-colonised? In the context of the Waldorf curriculum this rhetorical question only applies if we see the curriculum as a work of art that cannot be modified in any substantial way (restoration, repair and footnotes aside). Our view is that the Waldorf curriculum is not art for the museum, conserved, canonized and curated, but rather an ongoing, iterative, rhizomic and emergent process.

There are many pressing reasons why we need to rethink curriculum within the Waldorf movement. It is worth mentioning these, if only briefly. Most national and transnational educational organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD (PISA), and the European Union, have been reforming educational goals and emphases since the 1990s Delor report, "The Treasure Within", creating many lifelong learning initiatives and the new competency and key skills systems. Today there is a counter move to include wellbeing, core capacities such as empathy (e.g. the UNICEF *What Makes Me*? Report, to which Martyn contributed https://www.unicef-irc.org/what-makes-me). And there is a broader movement to seeing learning and development as inextricably linked with the opportunities a society or nation affords (e.g. Nussbaum, 2011).

Nevertheless, in many countries, the state requires Waldorf schools to implement national curricula, or at least to demonstrate that the Waldorf curriculum is compatible with state expectations. National education ministries are rightly concerned that education systems meet the needs of society and the economy and that no child is left behind. The methods they choose to ensure minimum standards and quality may be harsh or involve inspections and testing, but the desired goal cannot be seriously questioned. Laws and regulations are not usually created to cause problems for Waldorf schools, but they often have that effect. In Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, for example, national Waldorf federations have published their local version of the curriculum, but such activities are beyond the resources of many other countries.

Since the inception of Waldorf education, societal change has been more rapid that at any time in human history. We, and the children we teach, are faced with major new crises and these changing conditions have changed the ways in which we live and think. A problem highlighted by Stefan Leber in the 1994 UNESCO Waldorf Exhibition catalog is that we cannot simply keep adding new content to an already full curriculum.

There is also a growing awareness that the originally Eurocentric curriculum needs to be significantly adapted to take into account geographical locations and cultural histories

outside Central Europe and from a non-Eurocentric perspective. This has led to calls to recontextualize and even decolonize the curriculum by incorporating non-European cultures and histories, indigenous voices, include the history of the oppressed and the full scope of postcolonialism, and a new gender consciousness, as well as reflecting contemporary values regarding family life, work and equal opportunities. In many ways, traditional versions of Waldorf curricula have not adequately addressed these aspects.

Finally (although other reasons could be given) Waldorf education is in the process of opening up to the broader educational discourse, especially in the academic and political spheres. This requires that we reintroduce the core ideas of Waldorf education into contemporary educational discourse, and in order to do this we must make the educational approach comprehensible to others.

The search for a model for international curriculum development

Over the years, a number of attempts have been made to define key features of Waldorf schools, the education and teacher education and to establish general criteria for the international development of curriculum, but we believe these have been hampered by some conceptual problems. One of these problems is the historical development of the Waldorf movement and the role that the curriculum has played in it, as well as the question of what is canonical and what needs to be adapted and changed. A third issue is the question of translation in the broadest sense.

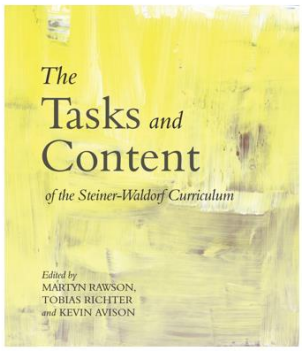
Caroline von Heydebrand, who published the first curriculum in 1925, was very clear in her brief introduction when she wrote that teaching is based on the following processes:

- a pedagogical anthropology based on spiritual science, on the basis of which teaching methods and didactics - the art of teaching - should be built, using an ideal model of the developing human being, a curriculum would be developed containing all the things that students should learn in each year: **“The ideal curriculum must follow the changing picture of human nature in the different age-groups, but like every ideal it must deal with the reality of life and adapt itself to this” (Heydebrand, 1925/1994, p. 3)**
- Steiner gave some examples, but teachers should develop the curriculum based on the above principles and their own insights; **“We need to be able to develop our curriculum ourselves at any moment , by learning to read from the children what they need, depending on their age” (Steiner, 2020, 311).**

Over the years leading up to the 1990s, this first curriculum, along with Stockmeyer's (1965/2014) collection of curriculum notes from Steiner's lectures and his work with teachers in Stuttgart, was expanded and translated into various languages. It is not possible here to show this process in detail (see Rawson, 2021), but the original curriculum presentation was often literally translated, with little adaptation to meet local cultural needs.

In the 1990's attempts were made to re-formulate the curriculum in German, edited by Tobias Richter, and there have been several new editions of this up until 2019. A curriculum was published in English in 2000, which combined the German Richter curriculum (1996)

with the UK Waldorf curriculum (Mepham & Rawson, 1997) in what became Rawson & Richter (2000, later revised in 2014). The Rawson & Richter curriculum has been translated and adapted many times in many countries because it was in English but also because it presented the education from K-12 in a way education authorities could relate to.



Metaphors for curriculum dissemination and development.

We have chosen a botanical metaphor to describe the process of curriculum dissemination. One can think of the Waldorf curriculum as a tree with a strong trunk and deep roots that has many branches. The fruits of this tree are collected by educational 'botanists' and planted in educational 'botanical gardens' in their own countries. There, the seeds grow into essentially the same tree, depending on soil and climate conditions and state of care. In botany, imported species are known as exotics and are distinguished from native plants. This image represents Waldorf education, its forms of practice and curriculum, transported to other countries where it thrives, but predominantly as an exotic.

The alternative image for the spread of Waldorf education is that of a rhizome spreading from an underground or invisible network, from which new shoots emerge wherever conditions are suitable for growth. Perhaps an even more apt analogy would be the network of symbiotic and mutually reinforcing mycorrhizal life forms and processes that connect fungi to the roots of trees in a forest, which have been described as a "wood wide web."

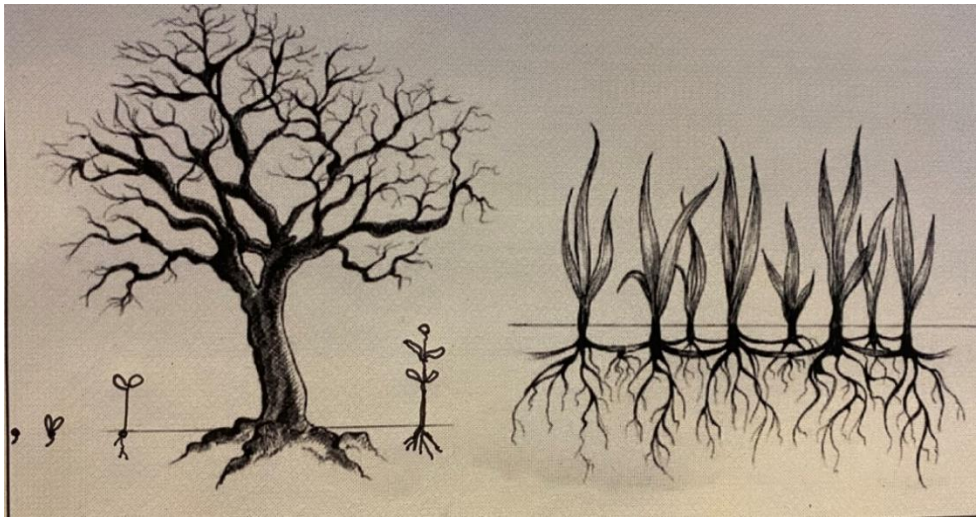


Figure 1 A comparison of tree-like and rhizome-like metaphors for the spread of Waldorf education and curricula.

The rhizome-like model has the advantage that teachers in Taiwan, for example, if they want to develop a Waldorf curriculum for their schools, do not have to cultivate the Central European exotic 'plants'. They can allow a rhizomic curriculum to be grown from the common network of ideas. Metaphors have their limits, though we feel the message is clear; it is not necessary to import exotic curriculum content (e.g. Old Testament and Norse myths as story material), nor find close equivalents to this material, which anyway is often impossible. Rather the task is to develop local curriculum from common rhizomic source. The question is, what comprises the common rhizomic source for Waldorf curricula?

The main difference between the arboreal and rhizomic curriculum metaphors is that in the arboreal model, there is a central, unique, original, authentic curriculum, the seeds of which which can be transplanted, whilst all developments arising from the rhizomic model are equally valid, having the same common source. One could even go further and extend our botanical metaphor and suggest that "international bees" could fly from the Northern and Southern American, African, European and Asian tree blossoms cross-pollinating and thus producing stronger, healthier hybrids. Just imagine; Waldorf schools all over the world would benefit from fruitful innovations that emerge anywhere in the 70 countries currently hosting Waldorf education. We realize that this perspective is potentially challenging for any Waldorf teachers who assume that there is an original curriculum, which all should remain faithful to.

Ideal curriculum

According to Steiner in relation to what he called the ideal curriculum:

> We must approach this curriculum in such a way that we put ourselves in a position to actually, at every moment, form it for ourselves, so that we learn to read off the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th years and so on what we have to do in these years. Tomorrow we will juxtapose the ideal curriculum with the curriculum as it is now customary in the public schools of Central Europe (2019, 643, MR translation).

Steiner argues that teachers must also deal with what comes to the children from the social environment until the social world changes (which is the long-term goal of Waldorf education). He then points out that:

> ...we will after all only be good teachers in the Waldorf school if we know the relationships between the ideal curriculum of the Waldorf school and what our curriculum must be initially because of the influence of the external social world. (ibid., 612).

The ideal curriculum must be adapted according to the age of the students, local cultural expectations, and the given situation.

The word *ideal* is usually interpreted in the sense of perfect, complete, accomplished, exemplary, or as a timeless generalization. Anything less than ideal is a poor and unfortunate compromise. And indeed this may be how Steiner understood the term. But the term ideal curriculum can also be understood in terms of Max Weber's notion of an

idealtypus or ideal-type. An ideal-type is an idea or model that integrates a number of aspects that are considered important by those concerned to provide a point of reference for real social phenomena. In the human and social sciences, the function of an ideal-type is to provide an idea or heuristic that contains as much of observed reality as possible, selected for a particular purpose or perspective, and serves as a conceptual point of orientation. An ideal-typical curriculum in this sense is one that outlines a central coherent idea around which the details of the curriculum can be constructed and ordered and evaluated in practice.

Steiner also often referred to the Waldorf school as a method school, e.g. when he said: "the Waldorf school principle is not a principle that wants to make a school with a particular worldview, but a method school. What is to be achieved by a method based on knowledge of the human being is turning children into physically healthy and strong, mentally free and spiritually clear human beings" (GA 305, p.157). As Angelika Wiehl (2015) has shown, the term method school here means that the way of teaching (etymologically *methodos* means the best possible path leading to the desired goal) and the way of achieving the educational aims is derived from the anthroposophical understanding of the developing human being.

Thus curriculum is based on an understanding of Steiner's pedagogical anthropology (as outlined in the First Teachers' Course), a reading of the actual students' needs in the context of what is socially and culturally required.

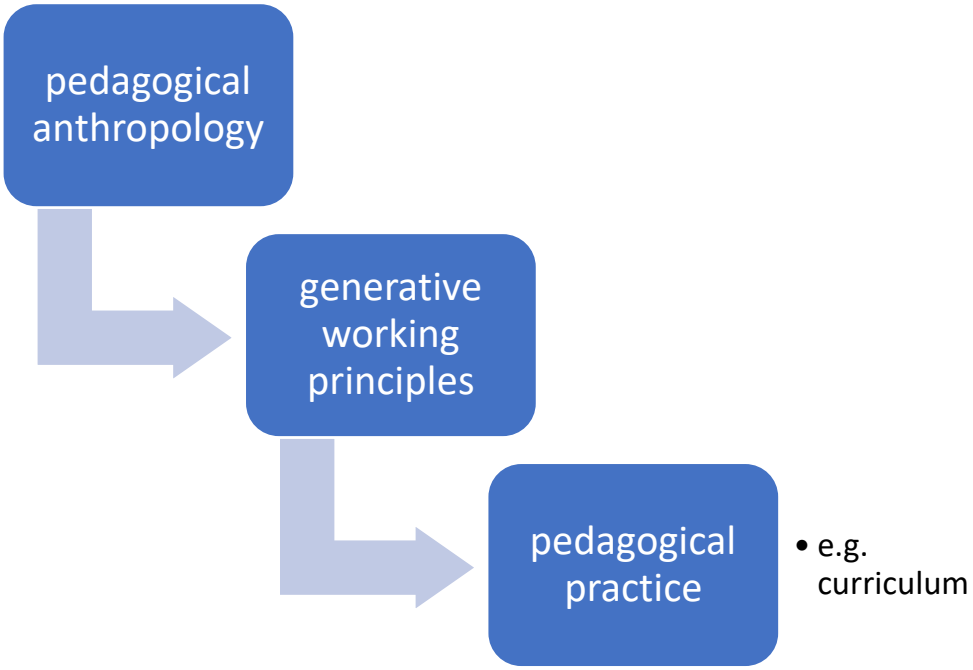
A new way of thinking about curriculum

To summarize, the challenges facing Waldorf curricula today are:

- finding a common, rhizomic basis for Waldorf education anywhere,
- adapting the curriculum to the radically changing conditions (e.g. climate change, war and conflict, the threat to democracy, digitalization and globalization, social fragmentation) and the impact these have on children's development,
- contextualizing curriculum to meet the requirements of diversity, social inclusion, equity and inclusion whilst recognizing cultural difference,
- meeting the diverse needs of our students adequately.

Given that the term curriculum has different meanings in different cultures, and differs from the original German term *Lehrplan,* it is necessary to define our understanding of the term curriculum. We found Bo Dahlin's (2017) definition very helpful, that curriculum is anything that pedagogically influences children and young people's learning. This includes the content, the teaching methods, when and where something is taught and who teaches it, and also the school climate.

We see the relationship between Steiner's pedagogical anthropology and pedagogical practice, including curriculum, as follows.



As Martyn has shown in his book (Rawson, 2021) one can derive a number of working principles derived from the general nature of the developing human being, that can be used to generate practice. Examples of working generative principles include:

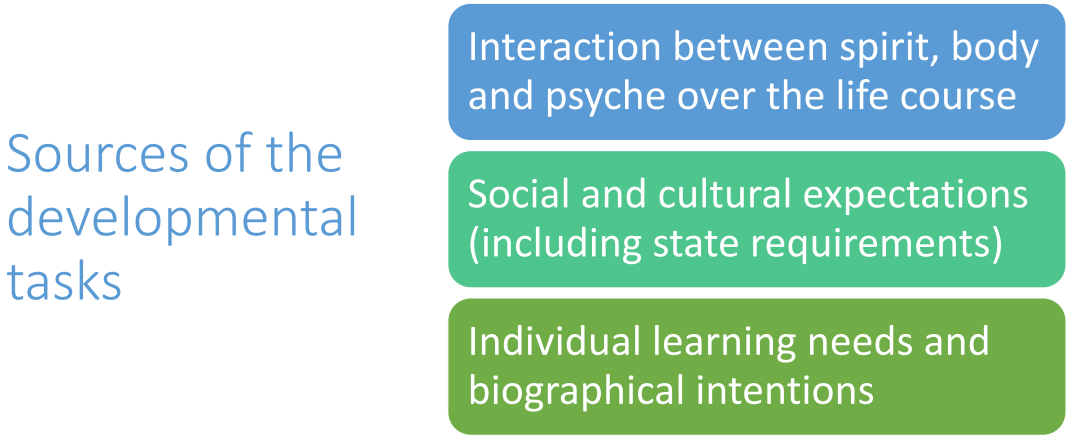
- salutogenic sense of coherence is a basis for healthy learning,
- the quality of a teacher's preparation influences the quality of learning,
- learning is a rhythmical process and requires time,
- direct experience is a basis for learning,
- living images are more sustainable over time than fixed definitions.

The difference between a working principle and an ideal or core value is that the former is an ideal-type, a heuristic model, rather than an absolute truth. It is important to be aware of the difference and not essentialize principles- they are tools. A school or schools' movement may articulate for itself values as aspirations, such as embracing diversity, or committing to working closely with parents. These values provide a context within which the education is practiced. The model shown above only shows how curriculum relates to the anthroposophical understanding of the nature of the human being.

Furthermore, we believe that Steiner intended Waldorf teachers to work with the ideas of his pedagogical anthropology as heuristic boundary ideas. A boundary idea spans the border between what we can observe with our sense and what we can apprehend in our thinking. Using anthroposophical ideas about the nature of the human being can do two things; they open our perception to extended understandings of life and the phenomena we experience can transform us. Anthroposophical ideas can be understood with our everyday thinking, then internalized and embodied so that they become dispositions. Such a disposition directs our attention to what is pedagogically salient and relevant in the moment. Steiner (1983) referred to this method as studying, meditating and remembering anthroposophical anthropology (previously referred to as study of man (sic)). The terms pedagogical intuition or tact are also appropriate. The combined process of assimilating anthroposophical ideas,

which we strive to understand with an open mind, and accurate observations of students and pedagogical situations, leads to new teacher capabilities.

Curriculum then is a pedagogical practice and response to the developmental challenges that children and young people face at key transitions in the life course. In fact these developmental tasks have three sources:



We know that developmental trajectories are highly individual and that there are no universal, fine-grained developmental stages (and certainly not year by year). As Remo Largo (2019) points out, human development is characterized primarily by variation and diversity, that at any given age, children's level of development will vary widely and that this is *normal*! However, Waldorf education, as Steiner developed it, builds on an ideal-typical developmental sequence that is offered to children and young people as a formative framework, on the assumption that offering a specific sequence of developmental challenges at the same time to a mixed ability and developmentally diverse group of students in a Waldorf class (usually with birthdays within a year of each other) will benefit them. This is both a gesture of social inclusion and also sensitive to individual biographical interests and needs.

When a group of diverse students of the same age engage with the same developmental themes at the same time they share experiences, which they will respond to in individual ways. The skilled artistry of teaching involves ensuring that each student has tasks commensurate with their needs and abilities and which scaffold the next proximal developmental step. We call this differentiation. The socially inclusive idea that students of different backgrounds, personalities and academic abilities should engage with the same important scientific and cultural themes is central to Waldorf education. At the same time, this has to be done in a way that enables each student to participate in ways that enable them to realize their potential.

As Gertrude Hughes puts it, " All human beings are 'I-beings'. Our uniqueness is what we have in common. Paradoxically, the realities and processes by which we individuate are universal ones" (2012,248).

This is the paradox of shared uniqueness and is,

> absolutely basic to Steiner's project. Steiner intends to demonstrate that human beings have a unique capacity that is largely unexercised. This capacity is freedom, and it takes the form of cognition or knowing, performed in the process of uniting concepts with perception in an experienced perceiving… In thinking we individuate concepts and universalize percepts (ibid).

Shared experiences- shared percepts- invite each of us to form concepts and relate these to what we already know about the world. Each of us will do this at different levels in different ways. The task of Waldorf education is to facilitate this process, so no one gets left out or behind. Each of us will understand Shakespeare's Tempest, or the economics of globalization, or phenomena like light and electricity in individual ways that are not fixed but can grow as our capacity for understanding grows.

Pedagogy as the relationship between teaching and learning creates curriculum as a pedagogical tool that provides the students with learning opportunities in the form of content, rich experiences in the world, practical activities and ideas that enable them to learn and thus to grow. By doing certain things in certain ways at certain ages, learning is activated and this prompts and supports development. Each successful stage of learning opens up new possibilities for further learning, and so learning drives development. One things leads, as it were, to another. Furthermore, because the learning is located in learning communities (the Waldorf class) of children and young people of the same age, it tends to align and harmonize the development within the heterogenous group.

Curriculum is not a plan that has to be implemented but a series of suggestions for learning opportunities. We can call curriculum a salutogenic process because it aims to create a context in which individuals and groups can develop resilience and well-being through the ongoing and sustained experience of coherence. This happens when children and young people generally feel that what they need to learn is understandable, manageable and meaningful. We recall Steiner's notion of economy of soul; one can teach as much content with minimal resources in the shortest possible time as long as not a single child loses the overview, i.e., no longer understands the meaning and purpose of the lesson (see Rawson, 2021).

Three-layered curriculum

We understand curriculum as a complex relationship between a universal core (the general nature of the developing human being) and iterative, rhizomic and emergent processes of adaptation and production. This allows us to distinguish three different layers:

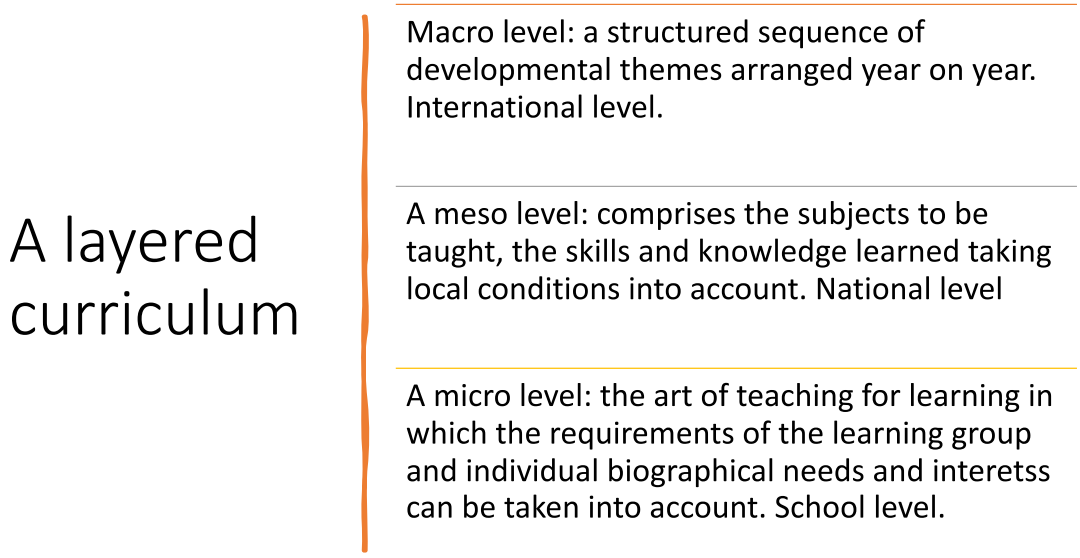


Figure 1 the three layers of curriculum and level of validity

At the macro level, no specific content is given, only developmental themes related to how learners relate to themselves, to their body, to others, to other cultures and to the world. What is common to Waldorf education anywhere is not certain content but the ideal-typical developmental sequence of themes and the general nature of the human being. Content comes in at the meso level and is dependent on the current educational aims, situated as they are in time and geographical and cultural space. Even though there are common requirements such as literacy, numeracy and scientific and information technology literacy and historical consciousness, these are nevertheless different in Chinese, English or Ukrainian.

The old idea that teaching, for example, Norse myths is essential to Waldorf education is no longer a core criteria of what makes a Waldorf school Waldorf, though it doesn't preclude telling those wonderful stories. The key question to ask of any particular content is; if this is the pedagogical answer to a developmental question, what is that question actually and in what sense is this an answer? In other words, the answer to the question; why are we teaching what we teach? cannot adequately be answered with, "because it is in the curriculum".

Seen through this lens, the von Heydebrand curriculum was a meso-micro level curriculum showing what was actually taught in the Stuttgart Waldorf School from 1919 to 1925.

Developing a curriculum

The following model of curriculum, referred to as The Art of Teaching for Learning Process, was created for the British and Irish Waldorf schools, but we think it may be of help to other countries. The core idea is not of establishing a generally valid curriculum but rather a bottom-up process of supporting teachers to plan and review their micro-curriculum. This is why we also developed a digital application so that each teachers can do this planning and

documenting digitally, whilst at the same time giving other colleagues and school leaders (and where necessary school inspectors) access to these plans. By documenting curriculum plans (known as 'schemes of work' in the UK) in this way, we can track the development of skills across the subjects and vertically from one year to another. This can be done on paper but a digital app makes it quicker and easier to gain an overview. It also helps novice teachers plan because they can look at what the school tradition is, what previous teachers in that grade and subject have taught, and for those who don't know the curriculum (not an ideal situation, but one that schools sometimes find themselves in), it offers orientation. Each teacher can design her own curriculum plans and justify them pedagogically. The examples provided are only for orientation. Thus there is no limit on pedagogical creativity but there is a degree of accountability, since others can see what has been planned and know why certain things are taught in particular ways.

We start with the developmental themes for early years and then each class from grade 1 to 12. This takes the form of a description of the ideal-typical developmental tasks, which essentially involve changing relationships to body, self, other and world. In the *Art of Teaching for Learning* process and the digital application we have also developed to facilitate its use, we reviewed the developmental tasks as described in the existing published Waldorf curricula and then modified them, taking developmental factors into account such as the earlier onset of puberty.

The next stage of developing (or reviewing an existing) curriculum is to identify the main topics taught in each year, in terms of morning lesson blocks and subject lessons. The content and main teaching methods of these blocks are briefly described. This is followed by a pedagogical justification which explains how the topic and methods address the macro-level developmental themes and the meso level requirements in terms of skills and knowledge. An important aspect of this process is identifying the constrained and unconstrained skills that should be learned in this time. Unconstrained skills are the basic skills required in any subject that need to be taught so that the students can become capable in this field. Unconstrained skills then grow on this basis over time and need opportunity, support and ongoing feedback rather than direct instruction. An example of unconstrained skills in the language arts is learning to read and write. Once these have been learned, students need many opportunities to practice, apply and development their literacy skills. There is no limit to how these skills can individually be developed. This is true of all areas in which skills are learned. The only limit is if schools choose to hold back skills development by burdening learners with memorizing knowledge in order to test it- this reduces the potential that can grow when young people have opportunities to develop their skills.

Since we are reviewing our curriculum and asking why are we teaching what we teach, and what the most appropriate content and learning methods are, we can also ask if there are ways in which the content needs to be re-contextualized, updated, freed of colonial or Eurocentric assumptions and perspectives and whether it contributes to inclusion and diversity.

At this stage in the process, it may be helpful to document resources used, poems, songs and other materials used, especially if these are evaluated afterwards.

The final sections of the process include age-related learning opportunities and learning descriptors. The *Art of Teaching for Learning* process (and digital app) suggests the learning opportunities that should be offered in each subject, in each class. These relate to how skills and knowledge are learned, and also allows teachers to track academic subjects across different blocks. They are usually formulated in an open way using verbs to describe the activities, for example; "children in Class 2 should have the opportunity to observe / explore / encounter / discover / document / practice etc."

For each subject, a progression of learning levels from beginner to emerging expertise is formulated. These levels are separate from the learning opportunities in each class, but are of course interrelated. Since there is a normal range of learning at each age, students can be assessed according to their level of learning (usually there are at least three levels in each class - one below and one above the level of the class).

An example of how the age-related learning opportunities are formulated (for grades 1 to 8) are shown in the following examples:

Age Related Learning Opportunities (ARLOs) for Literacy	**Learning Descriptors (LDs)**
Kindergarten	Emerging literacy
Class 1	Beginning literacy
Class 2	Early literacy
Class 3	Developing literacy
Class 4	Moderately fluent literacy
Class 5	Fluent literacy
Class 6	Experienced literacy
Class 7	Independent literacy
Class 8	Mature, independent literacy

The following table shows an example in detail from the literacy age-related learning opportunities and their relationship to the learning descriptors:

Class 4 Literacy ARLOs (excerpt)	**Literacy LDs (excerpt)**
• To practice writing longer and more complex	**Early Literacy** Children can compose and write short, simple texts on a familiar topic. They add detail and description,

sentences and pieces of writing, • To practice using resources such as dictionaries, word lists, wall displays etc • To practice writing and reading different forms of text and text for several different purposes, e.g. letters, lists, diary entries, information texts, stories etc	drawing on their reading experiences. Children use some longer, more complex sentences. **Developing Literacy** Children can compose, write and structure longer pieces of writing in familiar formats and for different purposes, using resources for support if prompted. **Fluent Literacy** Children plan, structure, edit and proof-read their writing, adapting for the audience, drawing on their reading experience and using organisational and presentational devices.

The more comprehensive presentation in the Art of Teaching for Learning book also includes a description of the aims for each subject and shows the ways in which potentialities are developed (which we leave out in this short account). At a glance, the overall criteria for curriculum development can be shown as follows:

Macro-level	Overarching pedagogical/developmental themes for the year group, description of the developmental journey across the subjects
Meso level	1. Description of themes of each short and long 'block' or learning arc
	2. Indicative content
	3. Pedagogical reasoning
	4. Contextualising / decolonising/inclusive aspects to be taken into account
	5. Resources for teacher research
	6. Suggested narrative, recitation and song material
	7. Examples of planned learning experiences and tasks
	8. Formulation of the age-related learning opportunities (ARLOs) and learning descriptors (LD)
Micro-level	With reference to the above the teacher draws up a teaching and learning schedule for their class and/or subject.

Developing curriculum in other countries

The Art of Teaching for Learning process and digital app was designed for the UK and Irish schools and the curriculum suggestions are based on this. This provides a framework for comparison, for example, of the age-related learning opportunities and learning descriptors. For use in other countries we recommend the following protocol.

1. Firstly the overarching themes, aims and purpose for each subject are translated into the local language if necessary.
2. Then the country/school are asked to draw up a plan of their existing main lesson and subject lesson themes. This can be compared with that in the app.
3. For each block the local teachers or curriculum team draw up indicative content and methods for each block and write a brief pedagogical reasoning for these.
4. Each block is then reviewed in relation to contextualizing, inclusion and decolonizing.
5. Relevant resources are documented, and research questions identified.
6. Age-related learning opportunities and learning descriptors are formulated.

We believe there will be some overlap between curricula at the meso level but we make no assumptions about this. Once this exercise has been done and reviewed, the outcomes can be translated into English and compared with other national Waldorf curricula and can form a basis for dialogue and exchange. Other considerations include a scale to characterize students' well-being.

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