

L1: The role of the “I” and “soul” between social and biological influences in human learning.

By Dr Robert Rose

This module addresses the central question in Steiner Education, namely that of child development (**ontogeny**) and the principles by which human beings can learn. In that sense, this module serves a dual purpose in providing the link between **ontogeny** and **pedagogy** (the principles of teaching and learning).

In Steiner School contexts, the connection between *ontogeny* and *pedagogy* is central. Put another way, the very concept of **Learning** is dependent on **Ontogeny**. So this module then helps with coming to an understanding of what the **Concept of Learning** is in Steiner Contexts. This also provides the background for the curriculum modules we will be doing later in the Diploma. In the context of Steiner’s overall philosophy, child development is a part of his views on human nature and how this develops over a lifetime. What is crucial to his ideas about education is that the way we learn is, or should be, tied into how the human being develops in distinct phases. In Steiner’s educational philosophy, each phase of human development there is, for him, a distinct type or mode of learning associated with it. As we will see, there are, for Steiner, three major types and nine sub-types of developmental change and consequently three major types of Learning Principles and nine, in theory, sub-types. This concept, in principle, may affect how children’s learning can be assessed (see module 8 for the “Key Stages” in Steiner Education).

Child Development and the Aim of Education

One of the questions that surround education concerns its aims. The **aims** and **methods** of education are arguably inseparable from that of how **child development** is conceived. For Steiner, the **primary** goal of education is the **healthy development of the whole human being** rather than the accumulation of so much theoretical knowledge or the acquisition of skills to meet the demands of the economy. Steiner viewed the latter as **secondary** to the main goal of education. For him, not having this healthy development as the primary goal had negative outcomes. For example:

“We could, indeed, venture to say that today’s education is in many respects an education not toward humanness but toward the most obvious type of human automaton—namely, the bureaucrat. Our children are trained to become bureaucrats. Such people are no longer really human. They are fixed, they have an existence, they are finished. The human being is lost, is concealed behind the label. We have an appointment with an officer, be it a clerk or barrister, and it matters little who the actual person behind the label is.” Steiner, R (1921): Education for Adolescents, Anthroposophic Press, p. 57/58.

What he was looking for was an education which took into consideration what the totality of healthy human development is.

More generally, Steiner conceived education as being aimed at the development of human health rather than the mere accumulation of intellectual concepts:

“So it is in teachers’ hands to promote either health or illness in children. If teachers insist on making students smart intellectually according to modern standards, if they cram children’s heads with all sorts of intellectuality, they prevent subconscious forces of wisdom from permeating those children... Herbert Spencer was quite correct when he spoke of the negative effects of a monastic education aimed at making the young excel intellectually. He pointed out that in later years those scholars would be unable to use their intellectual prowess, because during their school years they had been impregnated with the **seeds of all sorts of illnesses**... So much for the importance of teachers getting to know the fundamentals that govern **health and illness** in human beings. Here it must be emphasized again that, to avoid becoming trapped by external criteria and fixed concepts, you must learn to recognize the **ever-changing processes of human nature**, which always tend toward either health or illness. Teachers will encounter these things in their classes, and they must learn to deal with them correctly”. Steiner, R (1922): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 99/100.

This does not exclude the education of the intellect, or thinking, but, for Steiner, this needs to be done in the right age phase. Hence his requirement that teachers understand child development as a process towards health.

He earlier said that:

“Here you have an example of how soul and spirit interact with what is physical. It shows us how important it is for teachers to know how to deal with children’s tendencies toward health and sickness. Of course, illnesses have to be treated by medical doctors, but educators are always confronted by inherent trends toward health or sickness in children, and they should learn to recognize these tendencies. They should also be aware of how illnesses can come out later in life and how, often, they can be traced back to what happened in school. Such knowledge makes **teachers far more circumspect in choosing their teaching methods.**” Steiner, R (1922): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 79. (My bold)

A particular aspect of the aim of education and the primary goal of human health is that of the development of freedom:

“We consciously try to aid and foster **healthy development of the physical body**, because in this way the soul and spiritual nature is given the best means of unfolding freely through a child’s own resources. By doing as little harm as possible to the spiritual forces working through children, we give them the best possibility of developing in a healthy way... You may ask which educational ideal such an attitude comes from; it arises from complete dedication to **human freedom**. And it springs from our ideal to place human beings in the world so that they can unfold individual freedom, or, at least, in such a way that physical hindrances do not prevent them from doing so...” Steiner, R (1922): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 195. (My bold)

For Steiner, there is a deep connection between the development of the health of the human being and the emergence of freedom later in life. This requires the right educational methods in accord with the distinct phases of child development.

In fact, Steiner went so far as to say that not using the right educational methods had dire consequences:

“Children who, through educational malpractice during the school years, have been **prevented from breathing properly** and from using their system of bones and connective tissue properly, **will not grow up to become free individuals**. Likewise, students whose heads have been **crammed with fixed ideas and concepts** deemed important for later life **will not become inwardly free**. Children will not grow into a free human beings unless their childhood needs, as imposed by physical development, were both understood and catered to through the appropriate **educational principles and methods**. Naturally, the soul and spiritual needs of children must also be recognized and met with the right educational methods.” Steiner, R (1922): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 196. (My emphasis)

For Steiner then, the aim of education is the emergence of human freedom through the healthy development of the body whilst also meeting the needs of soul and spirit through the appropriate educational methods. These educational methods, in turn, depend on how child development is understood. We will consider this next.

In many respects, the question of the aims of education and the associated methods, highlight a central question of Human Nature and Child Development: how are they to be conceptualised? In many places, Steiner perceived in his day how the human being was being increasingly conceived as a kind of machine. Today there are a number of similar philosophies of education that interpret the way humans learn in terms of a machine, specifically computer, like way. For Steiner, this would be to apply an inorganic method to the human being which would be inappropriate as it is only relevant to the physical dimension of the human being. As we have seen, Steiner was of the view that humans have at least four major levels to their being and that education and learning is directed primarily at the highest two levels: the soul (thinking, feeling, willing) and the spirit (the “I”). It is not to say that the life and physical levels are not important, it is just that the methods of research in relation to learning are focussed on the Cultural / Humanities research methodology (as per module 2). That is, that type of research into the role of thinking, feeling, willing and the “I” in the context of the **Principles of Learning**. It might be good at this point to revise your understanding of lecture 1 from module 2.

Defining Child Development

One question that we need to address is how child development can be defined. Here is one such view:

“[Child Development is] the growth of perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and behavioural capabilities and functioning during childhood. The term childhood denotes that period in the human lifespan from the acquisition of language at one or two years to the onset of adolescence at 12 or 13 years.” **Child development.** (2008). Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Encyclopaedia Britannica 2008 Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

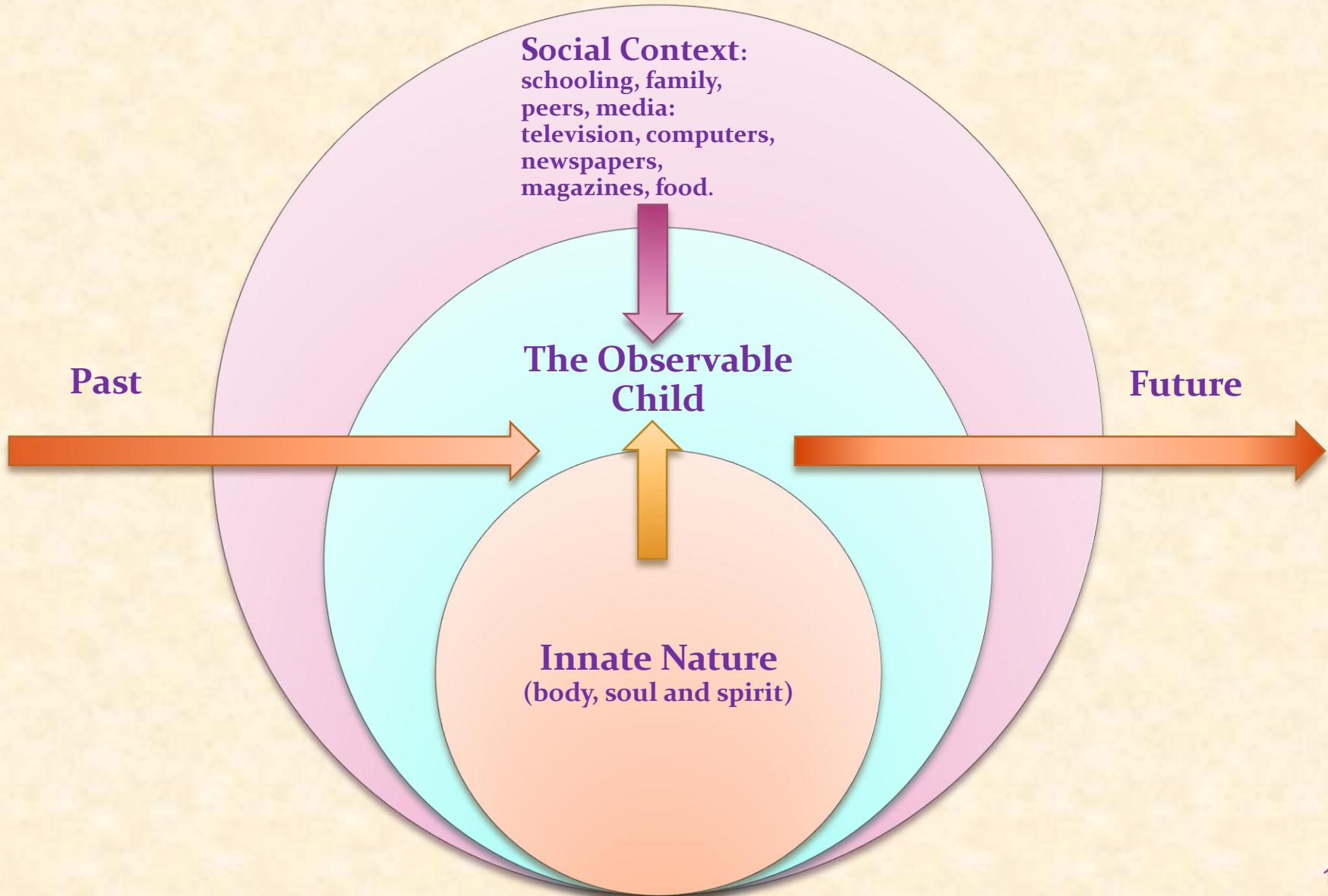
By this definition, child development concerns more than the change of the physical body over time, but also includes perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and behavioural capabilities. This is a view that coheres with Steiner's views to some degree, but with the requirement that the details of the child development (ontogeny) need filling in together with the link to the pedagogy. Moreover, the way scholars think about child development has changed over the last century and how the different dimensions of the human being are connected:

“Developmental and educational theorists have discussed the value of the **child development knowledge base for teachers** throughout the past century. However, actual educational practice throughout this time period has been modelled on conceptions of learning and development defined by either the **behaviourist** tradition (Brown, 1994) or by extreme **biological** views such as entity ideas that intelligence is fixed or maturationist views that children develop on their own. During the past decade, psychologists denounced those prevailing beliefs and practices, endorsing instead educational practices based on current knowledge about how children develop and learn (American Psychological Association [APA], 1997; Brown, 1994; Kuhn, 1997). Consequently, attention has been refocused on “**child-centred**” practices identified with **constructivist**, **social constructivist**, or **ecological** theories. Although some conceive of the differences among these theories as irreconcilable D.H. Daniels, L. Shumow / *Applied Developmental Psychology* 23 (2003) 495–526 (Case, 1998), others see them as complementary (Cobb, 1994). Common threads relevant to education among these theorists include the ideas **that effective teaching must be based on understanding the child and the vision of children as active agents in their own education**”. (D.H. Daniels, L. Shumow , *Applied Developmental Psychology* 23 (2003) 495–526) (My bold)

So there is a gradually emerging concept in the academic world that teaching should be based on an extended view of child development and that children are active agents in their own learning. As we will see throughout this module, Steiner had his own view as to the nature of both of these.

To begin this, consider what might be meant when we speak of a child or of a human being more generally. It may be tempting to some to see each child as a separated entity, somewhat isolated for that which is around them with thoughts and feelings that are entirely their own and un-associated from those of others. However, from an assumption free perspective consider the next slide and contemplate the different elements that may play into the existence of a child and how they develop from the past to the present and into the future:

The Child between Innate Nature and Environmental Context



In the slide above, you will see a picture of the basic parameters of child development that are accepted by most academics. Of course, some will reject aspects of the picture; others will emphasise the importance of some parts more than others. However, as questions, all the above do appear in modern discourse, including Steiner. This representation is my own picture of this. Consider the central circle. I have called this the “Observable Child”. This is the child that one can observe, moment by moment, over time. Of course, every child can be considered an individual, so great caution is needed with such generalised images. What is meant by such a picture is not as a statement of fact, but a way of “seeing” or researching the world of children in their development.

As can be seen from the slide, the question about child development concerns the dynamic between innate development and social context. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that most discussions about child development revolve around these two basic positions. As you can see, the question concerns whether or not child development is primarily determined by outer social conditions or inner, or innate, nature. In the picture, you can see that I have put “body, soul and spirit” as innate nature. This looks like a Steiner concept, but I mean this in a more general way. For example, materialistic biology may well reject an independent “soul and spirit” and argue for innate development as a form of biological or genetic process. For such a position, there are so-called called “emergent phenomena”, like cognition, emotion and will, but these are of a biological origin. These emergent phenomena are advocated by those ascribing to a view called “complexity theory” (see Cohen et al on this). So for this view, child development is innate, but, on a fundamental level, is biological in character. An example of innatism would be Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Obviously, Steiner adds further levels of reality to this with his ideas of soul and spirit.

The other position is that of social determinism. For this position, child development is determined by the outer social context. As you can see, this includes social forces derived from: school, family, peers, media, television, computers, newspapers, magazines, food. For this, a child's development is due to such external forces. The task of education here is to help the child develop into society, sometimes called "socialisation" in the broadest sense of the term. A possible example of this might be the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934).

To get an overview of these two positions, you can study Piaget and Vygotsky in: Barbara Blake and Tandra Pope "Developmental Psychology: Incorporating Piaget's and Vygotsky's Theories in Classrooms", *Journal of Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May 2008), pp 59 – 67. [Attached]

There is also a third view which interprets the “observable child” (or person more generally) as a complex combination of social and biological forces. This position is sometimes called “dialecticism” because the human being is conceptualised as a kind of “conversation” between inner and outer conditioning. One finds this kind of reasoning in Professor Steven Rose’s book “*Lifelines*” (1997).

Have a think here about two questions: where do you think Steiner fits in here, if at all; secondly, by what means do you think children “develop”?

The Dimensions of Child Development

So, when we think about how a child develops, or human beings more generally, we may consider the following four dimensions (there may be more):

- 1) Cognitive Development
- 2) Emotional Development
- 3) Social Development
- 4) Physical Development.

These are thought to be interconnected and interdependent.

In terms of our previous conversation, this leads to the following possible connections in relation to development and, as we will see later, learning:

Birth

Biological Determinism

Social Determinism

Dialectical Determinism



Learning comes from the evolutionary principles of survival and adaptation



Learning is determined by biological and social forces



Learning is determined by the social environment

So the question is: where does Steiner fit into this picture, if at all? Consider the following quotes:

“Essentially, there is no education other than **self-education**, whatever the level may be. This is recognized in its full depth within anthroposophy, which has conscious knowledge through spiritual investigation of repeated Earth lives [Reincarnation]. Every education is self-education, and as teachers we can only provide the environment for children’s self-education. We have to provide the most favourable conditions where, through our agency, children can educate themselves according to their own destinies”. Steiner, R (1923): The Child’s Changing Consciousness, p.141. (My bold)

“What must I do to enable this child to develop the fullest consciousness of human freedom at maturity? And with this question, a new truth begins to dawn. The outer conditions of life are already clearly pointing at it, and, through anthroposophic insight, it can be understood with inner certainty. It is the fact that, despite one’s freedom, each person has a destiny, or to use the Eastern term, karma... **How do I act so I do not interfere with a child’s destiny? And, above all, How can I best educate a child toward human freedom?**” Steiner, R (1922/2003): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p.102/3. (My bold)

As can be seen from this, Steiner had another interpretation of the nature and existence of the human being. Rather than being a mere outcome of either biological or social forces, Steiner conceived the human being as having an essential element that re-incarnated between different lives. In other places, he called this the human spirit or the “I”. It is this which he considers to be the primary centre of all learning and that the teacher’s task is to create an environment that enables this “spirit” or “I” to educate itself. For Steiner, **it is this education that leads to freedom**. This is not to reject all aspects of the other interpretations of human nature, either biological or social, and their contingent modes of learning, but it does establish a primary mode centred on the free human “I”. We may characterise Steiner’s view in the following way:

**Soul and Spiritual
destiny forces**

**The Incarnating
free “I”**

Birth

Biological Determinism

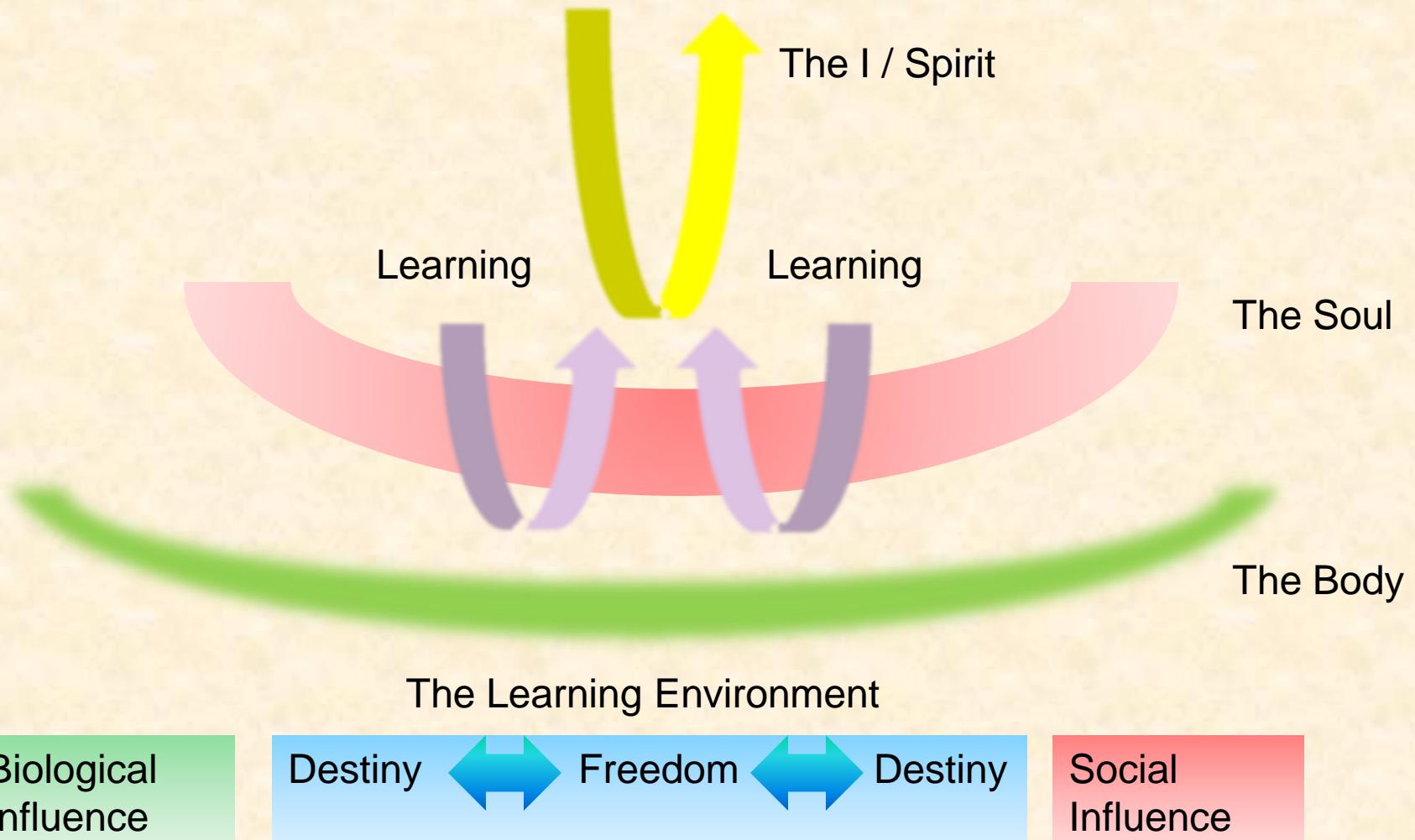
Social Determinism

Learning is conditioned by
the biological.

Learning is conditioned by
the social environment

The free “I” determines primary learning in
different modes in accord with all phases of
child development

Steiner conceived that the general learning process, if we are to respect the evolving freedom of the young person, to be one in which the child as body, soul and spirit engages with the world, biologically, socially and spiritually in a self-educational process in the context of spiritual, biological and social destiny forces:



So in the context of Steiner Education, the human being is not just a biological being, or a being determined by society, but also a being that is uniquely themselves. A view of education that sees the human being just as either biological or social or some combination of both can normally only conceive of the human being as a member of a group, or as a species. There are of course other ways of conceptualising our unique individuality, but Steiner's approach is to recognise this emergent individuality for birth onwards. Otherwise, this individuality can only be conceived as either due to random genetic mutations or as being derived from a unique cognitive / social "lifeline" over a lifetime.

Next we will provide an overview of Steiner's concept of the different phases of child development.

Child Development – A Steiner Perspective: Overview

There are many theories today about the nature of child development. The reading sent with this module gives a broad overview of such views. Each of these have a set of consequences for education and learning and the outcomes expected in children's attainment. Steiner's concept of child development is different in at least some respects to all of them in that, for him, education generally and learning in particular should be adapted to the development of the child. Likewise, the behaviour, the inner and outer states, of teachers and parents alike needs to be adapted to the healthy development of the children rather than the other way around, a prevalent view in normal life today in which adults demand a process in which the child is required to transit from out of their natural condition to that of the adult within an accelerated time frame.

Education and the Laws of Human Development

Steiner was convinced that there are actual **natural** laws of child development and such development is not random nor should it be an imposed reality from the adult world. Furthermore, he was convinced that education should be adapted to these natural laws:

“The right foundation for education, and for teaching also, consists in a knowledge of these **laws of development of human nature**. Even as man is surrounded, until the moment of birth, by the physical envelope of the mother-body, so until the time of the change of teeth — until about the seventh year — he is surrounded by an etheric envelope and by an astral envelope. It is only during the change of teeth that the etheric envelope liberates the etheric body. And an astral envelope remains until the time of puberty, when the astral or sentient body also becomes free on all sides, even as the physical body became free at physical birth and the etheric body at the change of teeth. Thus, Anthroposophical Science has to speak of three births of the human being.” Steiner, R (1909): The Education of the Child in the light of Anthroposophy, (pp. 27-30). (My bold)

We have considered the meaning of these rather unusual terms in modules 1 & 2. As can be seen, for Steiner, there is a distinct set of phases that children go through and to which teaching and learning needs to appeal, as we will see.

As indicated, Steiner conceived the human being as having at least four major levels of reality: physical, life, soul and spirit / “I”. For him, a holistic understanding of the human being cannot arise from the application of the inorganic research method alone, but must be deepened through the **appropriate research methodologies** for the life principle as well as the soul and the spirit (see module 2). Furthermore, Steiner had the notion that each human being undergoes phases of development which may be referred to as the “multiple births” theory of the four dimensions of the human being. If you recall from modules 1 & 2, the physical body is the unity of all the physical and chemical forces and materials in the human body; the life force (aka the etheric body) is that aspect of the human being responsible for growth, metamorphosis and propagation; the soul (aka the astral body) is the **unity** of thinking, feeling, willing, memory, imagination and perception. The “I”, or Spirit, is the central focus of the human being around which the other dimensions revolve and upon which they are dependent in terms of the principle of Freedom and Self-Consciousness. In order to outline the temporal development of these phases, consider the following slide that describes the relationship between the different elements of the human being according to Steiner (see Steiner, R (2003): *Soul Economy*, Anthroposophic Press, chapters 7-13):

Developing Levels of the Human Ontogeny



Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Physical Body (0 - 7 yrs) The human physical body is born and the life body, soul and spirit lie within in the unconscious.	Life Body (7 - 14 yrs) The Life body is born, a part of which becomes the faculty of imagination and free for education. The soul and the spirit lie within the unconscious.	Soul (14 - 21 yrs) The soul body is born, a part of which becomes free for education. The spirit lies within the unconscious or semi-conscious.	I / Spirit (21 - 28 yrs) The I/spirit is born, a part of which becomes free for self-activated education. The spirit attains the potential for self awareness and transformation.

These phases of development can then be integrated into his overall view of how teaching and learning needs to be adapted to them. In the later slides we will briefly consider each of the phases in turn. For now, we will give a schematic overview of the fundamental principles:

Steiner's General Theory of Developmental Phases

Developing Levels of the Human Being

Human Development	Phase 1 Physical Body 0 - 7	Phase 2 Life Body 7 - 14	Phase 3 Soul 14 - 21	Phase 4 I / Spirit 21 - 28
Learning Principles	Imitation – Perception to Action	Imagination, Feeling and Memory	Independent Thinking and Soul - The Self-determined ideal	Self – Activated Learning
Teacher Pedagogy	The Good Example	The Natural Authority	Respecting Freedom	Cognitive & Ethical Individualism
Schooling Level	Home & Kindergarten	Lower School	Upper School/ University	University / Life

As we will see, Steiner conceived each of these phases as having further sub-phases:

“One can recognize these seven-year periods throughout the entire human life, and each again can be seen in three clearly differentiated shorter periods.” Steiner, R (1922/2003): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 107.

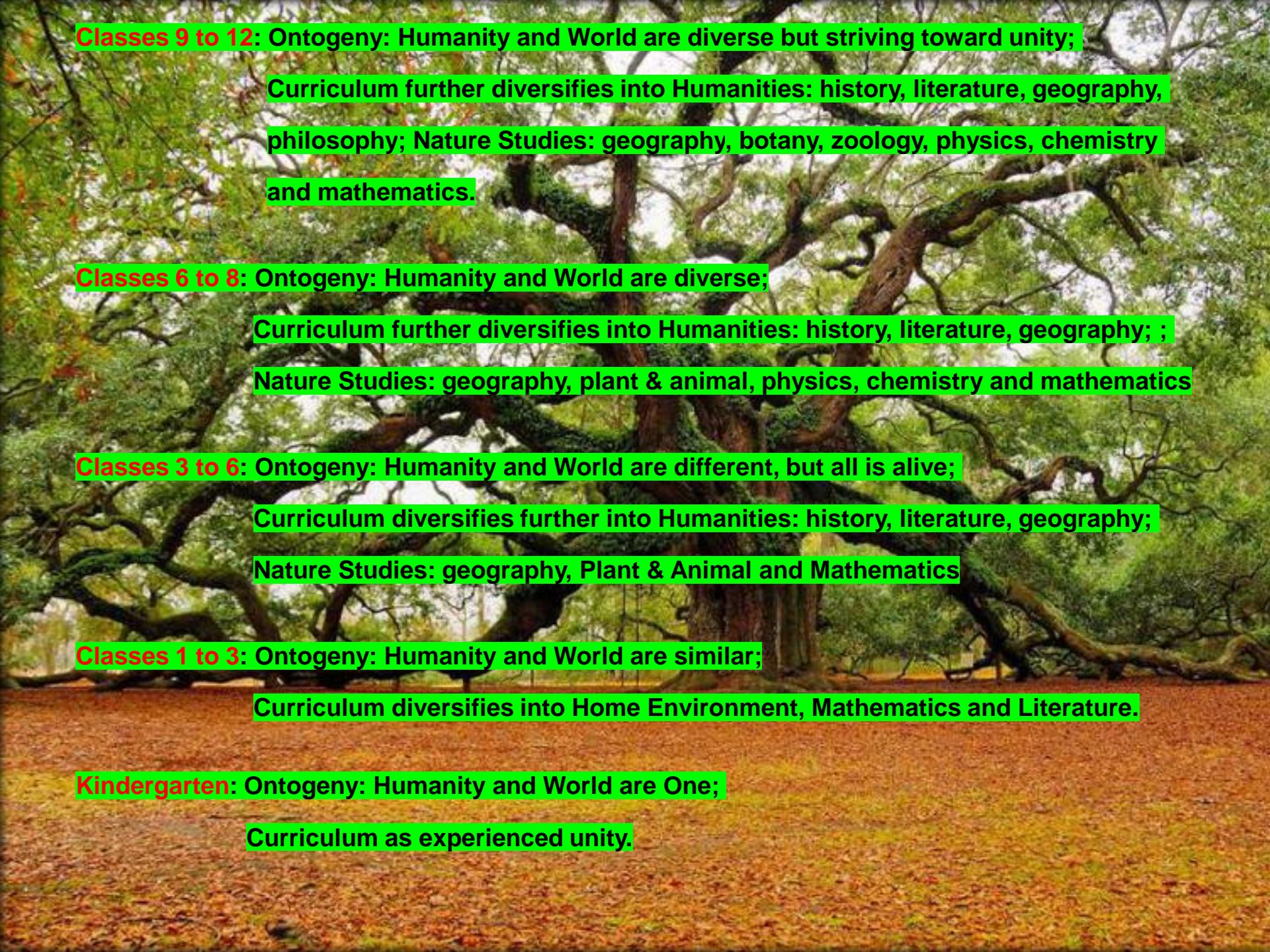
We will consider these in later lectures / power points.

A question that may come up at this point is: do these phases always happen in this way? Steiner's answer to this is no they don't; sometimes a principle from an earlier phase can appear later:

“At any stage of human development, it is possible to remain in a **fixed state**. If we describe the various stages of development, including the embryonic stage in today's survey and continuing through the change of teeth and on to puberty, we cover periods in which a fully developed human life can be formed... Every stage of life, including the embryonic, can be carried over into a later stage; the different phases of development, as they follow one another, are such that each new phase is a metamorphosis of the previous, with something new added... It happens with many children that the first stage is carried into the second, which then remains poorly developed. But this can go even further; the first stage of physical embodiment can be carried over into each of the others, so that attributes of the original stage appear in all the later stages... Human beings, however, are of a species that forms a complete natural order. And it can happen that, throughout life, one remains at the **imitative** state or requires an **authority** figure.” Steiner, R (1924): Human Values in Education, Anthroposophic Press, p.65/66. (My bold)

As we will see later on, the principles of imitation and authority are a rightful part of phase 1 and phase 2, so their continuance into the later phases, indeed into the rest of life, would be considered inappropriate by Steiner as both would be a denial of the development of human **freedom**. In the following, we will be considering what Steiner would consider the rightful order of development if education can meet the changing needs of the child.

On the basis of this ontogeny and the connected learning principles, the next two slides give a very quick glimpse and overview of how the curriculum grows from out of these. Starting from the bottom:



Classes 9 to 12: Ontogeny: Humanity and World are diverse but striving toward unity;

Curriculum further diversifies into Humanities: history, literature, geography, philosophy; Nature Studies: geography, botany, zoology, physics, chemistry and mathematics.

Classes 6 to 8: Ontogeny: Humanity and World are diverse;

Curriculum further diversifies into Humanities: history, literature, geography; ; Nature Studies: geography, plant & animal, physics, chemistry and mathematics

Classes 3 to 6: Ontogeny: Humanity and World are different, but all is alive;

Curriculum diversifies further into Humanities: history, literature, geography; Nature Studies: geography, Plant & Animal and Mathematics

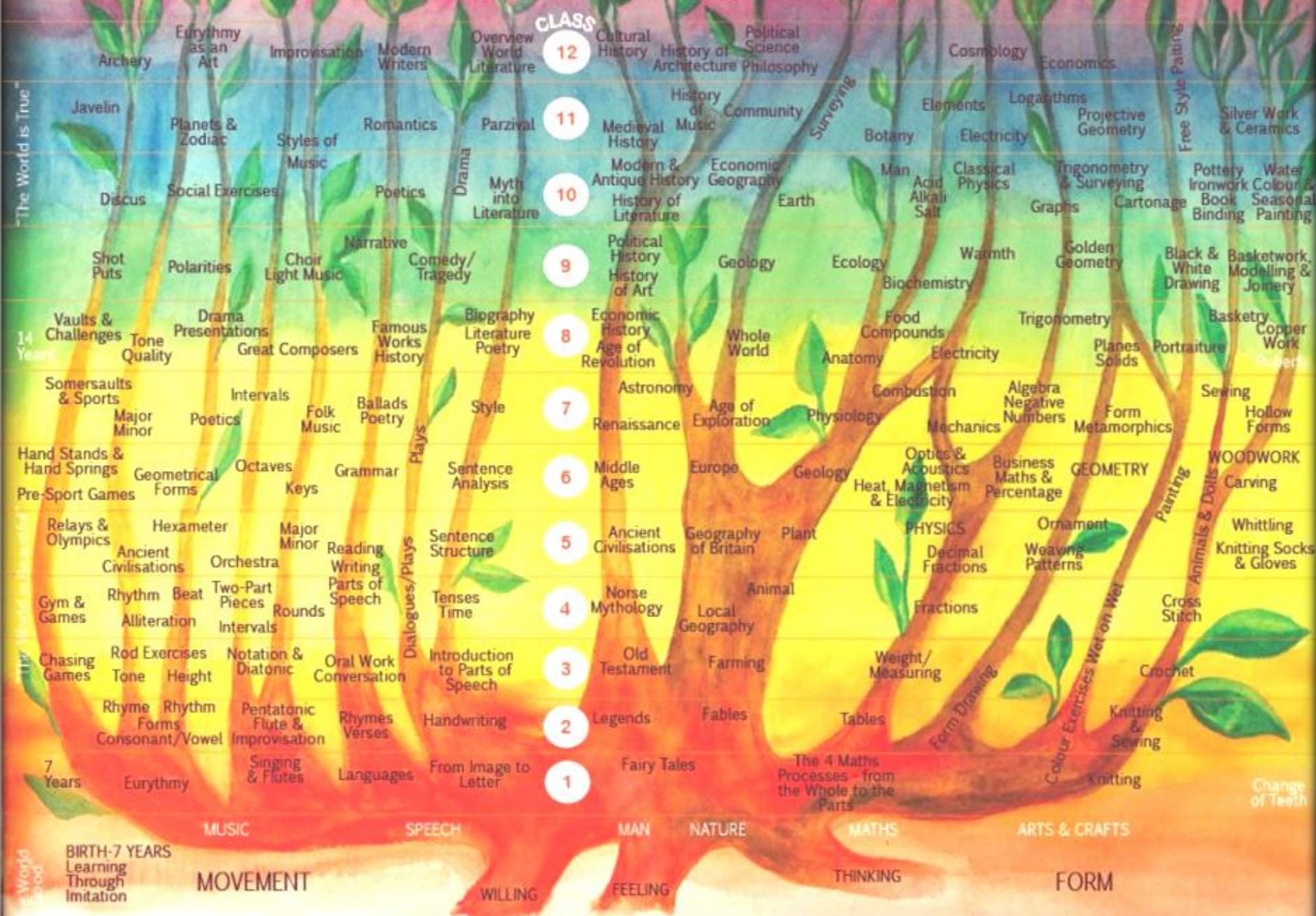
Classes 1 to 3: Ontogeny: Humanity and World are similar;

Curriculum diversifies into Home Environment, Mathematics and Literature.

Kindergarten: Ontogeny: Humanity and World are One;

Curriculum as experienced unity.

WALDORF SCHOOL CHART



We will now consider each of these phases of child development and with reference to the learning principles involved as well as give some indications about how Steiner conceived of the necessary cognitive and moral dispositions of teachers, parents and carers for the education to work optimally.

For those who are interested, there is a consideration of the more philosophical aspects of child development in the power point called “Philosophical Extras...”.

There is also a short extra on the temperaments.