

Chapter 9

A Case Study. Transition in a Waldorf School in São Paulo, Brazil: A Process Under Construction



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Abstract The chapter reports experiences of evaluations and follow-up of children transitioning from early childhood education into the first grade of a Waldorf elementary school located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. The study analyses the institutional strategies used to enable the school's transitional process for 6 to 8 year-old children, according to the current educational policy of the country. It presents the fundamentals of the Waldorf pedagogy, emphasising activities developed in early childhood education and the relationship between the maturity level of sensory-motor skills, cognitive, and social and emotional aspects and the formal learning process according to the Waldorf pedagogy. One section of the chapter explains the experiences of assessment and monitoring of all students in transition undertaken at the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School since 2012. Next, the national law regarding the transition between early childhood and elementary education is discussed, as well as its impact in the kindergartens and Brazilian Waldorf schools. The chapter highlights the importance of expanding the discussion about the social and emotional maturity levels of children's development in educational institutions and in society in general.

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Introduction

The transition from early childhood education to elementary education is a crucial moment in the child's life, which has emotional repercussions as well as impacts on the school trajectory of children and their families. This transition implies a set of continuous and complex changes in academic and social performance, adaptation, and autonomy because, in addition to changing space and/or school, there are changes in relationships, time, content, and learning contexts. According to researchers, these elements can be both opportunities and challenges for the child, family, teachers, and other professionals involved in this process (Chikwiri & Musiyiwa, 2017; Erkan et al., 2018; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; McIntyre et al., 2010; O'Toole et al., 2014; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2007; Rous & Hallam, 2006).

Due to these impacts, this transition must be understood from the perspective of the child, school, family, and community. Rous and Hallam (2006) place the child at the centre of the transition process, valuing their individual characteristics, but simultaneously highlighting the importance and influence of a set of factors related to the family and community. In the case of the family, their concerns, priorities, attitudes, values, cultures, and resources stand out. Factors related to the community highlight the importance of local systems and services, namely their articulation, leadership, financing, policies, and training in the area of transition. Therefore, the transition from early childhood education to elementary education must integrate a set of guiding principles that guarantee the quality of this process. Such planning highlights the value attributed to the child's development and learning.

Gould (2012) and Hanson (2005) each propose a set of principles that characterise the transition to elementary school as a process that involves the child, family, and different professionals from the school and the community. These principles are based on building positive relationships and on effective and collaborative communication between different individuals, with the result that the entire community assumes responsibility for implementing policies that take into account social, emotional and educational needs of the child, the family, and the school – and these form the basis for planning. This planning supports the social progress of the community, as it shapes the child's school trajectory, in addition to reducing stress and allowing the family and the child a comfortable and positive change from one level of education to another (Fowler & Hanzel, 1996; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2007; Salmi & Kumpulainen, 2017).

Recognising the importance of transition within education, this chapter presents a report of experiences of the transition from early childhood education to elementary education in a particular situation in Brazil. The chapter is divided into three topics. The first relates to early childhood education in the Brazilian context, addressing the legislation and policies related to the topic. The second topic is the description of the experiences, based on the foundations of Waldorf pedagogy. In the third and last topic, we highlight the challenges that Brazilian legislation poses to Waldorf schools to effect the transition from early childhood education to

elementary education, in ways which prioritise the social and emotional care of those involved.

Early Childhood Education in the Brazilian Context

Early childhood education as a right is a recent achievement in Brazil and sits within the context of public policies for the educational care of children from 0 to 6 years of age. From the struggles of social movements which intensified in the late 1980s, early childhood education as a right is recognised by the Federal Constitution of 1988, guaranteeing children's access to daycare centres and preschools. In the same decade,¹ *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* [Law Guidelines and Bases of National Education] (Brasil, 1996) defines early childhood education as the first stage of basic education. For Campos et al. (2011) the legal milestones reinforced and legitimised the processes of expanding educational assistance to children aged 0 to 6 years.

Since 2000, the legal framework has changed, which has in turn changed educational networks and the organisation of basic education. Among these changes are the lowering of the age for starting elementary education – from 7 to 6 years of age – and the introduction of compulsory schooling from 4 years of age. Thus, in Brazil, we now have compulsory basic education from the age of 4 years, with children aged 4–5 years attending early childhood education and those aged 6–14 years enrolled in elementary education. Extending the duration of elementary education to 9 years automatically shortens the duration of early childhood education to 2 years, forcing managers, educators, and the school community to reflect and create strategies that enable the school transition of children aged 6.

Campos et al. (2011) emphasise the importance of expanding the critical debate on the age of admission to elementary education. They argue that some school failures (such as difficulties learning skills, difficulties with literacy and/or numeracy, poor organisational skills, and socioemotional challenges) seem to be linked to children's reported immaturity at the time of entering elementary education. Further, it is argued that this could be avoided by increasing awareness on the part of the professionals, families, and public managers involved, about the importance of respecting the developmental time of each child and their sensory, motor, cognitive, affective, and social aspects (social and emotional skills), in addition to the child's chronological age.

The text of the *Base nacional comum curricular* [Common National Curriculum Base] (Brasil, Ministério da Educação, 2017) provides guidance on planning the transition from preschool to elementary school. When the transition happens within the same institution, the school must create forms of articulation between teachers

¹ In 1990, the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* [Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA)] (Brasil, 1990), created by Law No. 8069/1990, presents the principle of full protection and ensures equal conditions for access and permanence in a free public school, located near the student's residence.

at both stages to ensure that children are able to continue their particular learning and developmental processes. However, when the transition takes place between preschools and schools which are separate institutions, the document recommends that records and reports be shared among teachers of the respective schools, allowing elementary education teachers to know the development and learning processes experienced by children in preschool.

The Common National Curriculum Base (Brasil, Ministério da Educação, 2017) is a normative document that defines the essential learning skills that all students must develop throughout the different stages and modalities of basic education. Principle 3.3. – entitled *Transitions* – predicts that the continuity of learning processes for children depends on strategies appropriate to the different transitions experienced by the child (home/daycare; daycare/preschool and preschool/elementary education). The document also establishes that preschool education and elementary education institutions must develop transition programs to ensure alignment between the curricula and pedagogical practices of both schools. It is in this sense that we share below the experience of the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School.

Analysis of the Transition in a Brazilian Waldorf School

Waldorf pedagogy was created in 1919 by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner with the foundation of the first school in Stuttgart, Germany. Today, there are 1182 Waldorf schools in 66 countries and 1911 kindergartens in 69 countries (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners, 2021). In Brazil, Waldorf pedagogy has existed since the foundation of the first school in the city of São Paulo in 1956. In 2019, the Federation of Waldorf Schools in Brazil (FEWB) registered approximately 270 federated schools.

Steiner (1988) based his pedagogical proposal on the recognition that the human being is constituted of bodily, psychic (cognitive, affective and volitional), and spiritual elements. These elements are in a mutable relationship throughout human life, influencing each other. For Steiner, knowing the different stages of development and maturation of these aspects was essential for education to realise the full potential of students. Based on this assumption, Rudolf Steiner, together with the first Waldorf teachers, developed a curriculum that encompasses the different characteristics and stages of development of children and young people, taking into account the type of experience and content that best suits their needs (Steiner, 2003). In short, Waldorf pedagogy is characterised by proposing teaching content and methodology according to each age group.

According to Waldorf pedagogy, each cycle of human development lasts approximately 7 years and has qualitatively different characteristics with regard to bodily, psychic, and spiritual aspects (Lievegoed, 1994). By adapting to these phases, education offers children and young people the best conditions to develop their skills and abilities. Aiming at a comprehensive education, Waldorf pedagogy offers a diversity of subjects that provide students with a wide range of experiences and

possibilities for expression (including painting, music, crafts, gardening, and carpentry).

The curriculum is not fixed; it remains flexible to encompass historical and social differences, different cultural contexts, as well as the characteristics of each room, and the specific needs of students. Creatively reconciling knowledge about the different age groups and their characteristics with the needs of the reality in which the student lives is a challenge for the contemporary Waldorf teacher. The curricular changes need to be in line with the image of human development cultivated in Waldorf schools in order to be consistent with its pedagogical proposal (Bach Júnior & Guerra, 2018).

Waldorf early childhood education complies with the same principles listed above and maintains methodological differences in relation to elementary education and high school. The classrooms are mixed, usually with children aged between 3½ and 7 years old. It is possible to cultivate coexistence between different age groups in this space. The goal is to offer a warm and cosy environment that refers to home. The coexistence of children of different ages offers rich opportunities for them to interact while practising multiple roles (the oldest, the youngest, the leader, the follower, and so on), thus favouring the development of their social skills.

The activities undertaken throughout the day include the care and cleaning of the common space, such as gardening and cooking. Tasks are related to everyday life, and children can imitate and freely introduce them into their own games (Steiner, 2013). Other activities developed at the Waldorf preschools include drawing, painting, storytelling, music, and handicrafts. Free play inside or outside the classroom takes up a lot of school time, allowing children to develop their own experiences and exercise their fantasy skills spontaneously. Literacy occurs in the first grade of elementary education, rather than in preschool.

The period of early childhood education is marked by the development of many new skills in relation to the environment. Since the detailed description of these skills is not part of the scope of this text, we will present only the children's achievements at the end of preschool so that references for their transition to formal education in Waldorf schools can be considered.

Preschoolers at Waldorf School

From a bodily point of view, by the end of early childhood education, significant changes have occurred for the child – arms and legs have stretched, losing the rounded shapes that usually predominate in the body of younger children. Another indication of physical maturity is the exchange of temporary teeth for permanent ones.

Children of this age group who are encouraged to move freely have developed body mastery and security. Children's drawing also gains structure, showing how the child establishes the notion of space through free movement. Sensory and motor experiences are also decisive for the formation of an integrated image of their own

corporeity, which can be recognised in the way they represent the human figure in their drawings.

Most preschool children also show that they have developed some notions of time and process. Their concentration when performing activities increases and memory strengthens.

Playing also gains a new configuration, when it is marked by organisation and planning. Preschool children are able to guide actions based on their own goals. In the context of mixed classes, it is also possible to see how older children assume a leadership and care position in relation to younger children, showing resourcefulness to solve their social difficulties and deal with frustration. These social skills are acquired through daily living in the space of preschool and in the family nucleus.

For Waldorf pedagogy, early childhood education is the privileged space where these skills can develop through social interaction between peers and teachers, in games and artistic, manual, and corporal experiences. These experiences allow children to explore their environment actively, strengthening their self-esteem and confidence. These achievements will be required, particularly when entering elementary education, as they allow the child to adapt appropriately to their new social and cultural context. From the point of view of Waldorf pedagogy, the acquisition of these social and emotional skills is one of the indications that the student is ready for formal education. Good emotional, affective, and social development provides the basis for a better adaptation to the new school situation than cognitive performance taken in isolation (Kern & Friedman, 2008). Children who have acquired social and emotional skills deal better with the challenges and frustrations inherent to learning and new social situations. When the time for the child's transition from early childhood education to elementary education in a Waldorf school approaches, all the elements mentioned above are observed by the educators.

Greubel (2018) points out that each child acquires the skills mentioned above in relation to their environment and at their own pace. From the Waldorf pedagogical perspective, it would be impossible to establish a cut-off date for admission to elementary education, as provided by the Brazilian national legislation, as this would involve disregarding individual differences in child development. Observing each student and their characteristics is the mechanism through which it can be inferred, albeit without absolute certainty, whether the child is ready to begin formal education without losing their spontaneity, driven by an authentic desire to learn (Banning, 2009). In this context, each Waldorf school develops its own internal process to deal with this very delicate moment, taking into account the elements mentioned above and the social and legal context of its country.

Steiner pedagogy advocates that the first child development cycle (7 years) is completed around 6½ or 7 years of age. In Brazil, February is the beginning of the school year. This means that, in order to maintain consistency with the criteria used by this pedagogical proposal, children who turn 6 in the second half of the year raise doubts in relation to transition and demand care from the professionals responsible for observing them. In many cases, it is recommended that they stay in preschool in order to allow them to complete their early childhood developmental processes smoothly.

Planning the Transition from Early Childhood Education to Elementary Education at Waldorf School

Having established these parameters, we now describe the transition process with children at the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School. The school embraces children, families, and teachers in their transition process through different institutional actions that are implemented based on the demands of the school community. The process is constantly evaluated and modified.

At the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School, which incorporates preschool and elementary school, the first-grade rooms are composed of students from the school's six early childhood education rooms, children from other Waldorf kindergartens and a small number of children from schools with other pedagogical bases.

Initially, children who are candidates for the first school year are observed collaboratively by preschool and elementary education teachers. These teachers observe students in their own environment. After this observation, teachers jointly decide to transfer the child to elementary education or keep him/her for another year in preschool. As a consequence, the children could be admitted to school at 6 or 7 years of age. The information collected during the visit to the room is communicated to the parents who also participate in the decision making.

From 2012, with the creation of the pedagogical support area, there was an addition to the group responsible for supporting children in transition. A professional in the field began to observe all of the preschool children destined to attend the school throughout the second half of the year. A partnership was established with the Elementary Education Enrolment Committee, which consists of teachers and other professionals, such as occupational therapists. Preschool students at other Waldorf schools close to the institution are included in the transition process through visits made by a Pedagogical Support team. During these meetings, conversations are held with teachers to analyse the specific needs of students and, in some cases, to keep in touch with families, doctors, and therapists. This institutional mediation work makes it possible to strengthen ties with other Waldorf schools.

Experience moments are also organised by the school's Enrolment Committee twice a year, in which all candidates for the first grade participate so that through games they can be observed by elementary education teachers and members of the Pedagogical Support team within the institution's own space. The objective is to prepare a conscious and careful passage for the children, so that future teachers and Pedagogical Support professionals are aware of the necessary reception for students of future first grade groups.

The work with the transition revealed to the teams that not all teachers at the institution understood school readiness in the same way as it is understood by Waldorf pedagogy: as a set of sensory, motor, cognitive, affective, and social skills (social and emotional skills), as well as encompassing the child's chronological age. Of particular concern was the persistence of the idea that the child would mature over the first year of school, even though the evidence of monitoring these children

throughout their school life shows that this sometimes occurs with suffering and to the detriment of their self-esteem and wellbeing.

In 2019, a professional from the school's Pedagogical Support team started a pilot project specially focused on transition with children from preschool. In the first semester of the year, she entered all the preschool rooms at the school, watching the children in their own environment and becoming familiar with the routine of the rooms. In the second semester, she brought together groups drawn from the 48 children applying for the first grade of 2020. Groups of six students were formed with children from all classrooms, and their configuration changed with each meeting. This change in the constitution of the groups was due to the internal organisation of the preschool rooms, but it had the positive consequence that at the end of the process all the children knew each other.

Once a week, the professional performed activities in the school's gardening space with each group. The location was chosen as it allowed children to move freely. Many circle games were held, some that required agility and balance, such as climbing on fabrics ('spider web'), climbing on wooden stumps, or jumping rope. In gardening, the children built a small boat made of wood, sanded, nailed, and painted the boat sails with watercolor, chose branches for the mast, and so on. Simultaneously with this activity, the children heard a story about sailors who courageously go out to conquer new worlds. The image of the journey into the unknown and the discovery of a new world was intentionally included with the aim of offering children a symbolic framework for their transition between the stages of education. At the end of this activity, everyone played together before going back to their classrooms.

In the beginning of 2020, the teachers of the first grade rooms commented, with the Pedagogical Support team, on how the children had started the year prepared, safe, and ready for work. The project was also rated by the preschool teachers as very positive and they recommended that it should be incorporated into the actions already implemented by the institution.

Elementary education teachers are also responsible for monitoring the transition process. At the beginning of each school year, the preschool teachers, the Pedagogical Support team, and the teachers of the first grade rooms share important information about some students, allowing them to prepare an environment appropriate to the students' needs. At the beginning of the second semester, Pedagogical Support professionals make visits to the first grade rooms for 3 days, attending classes and observing children in their new environment. These observations are subsequently shared with the teachers, enabling an expanded understanding of the children and supporting the teaching work.

Families are also included in the transition process at the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School. An important part of the transition work involves conversations between teachers and family, sometimes with the presence of a Pedagogical Support professional, in order to explain the importance of preschool experiences and offer greater security in relation to the retention of their children for another year at preschool.

Since 2018, lectures have been organised with the same purpose at the beginning of each school year for the families of children who are candidates for elementary

education. Initially restricted to the institution's families, in the following year they started to include parents of children from other kindergartens, in order to share the pedagogical perspective on school readiness and the importance for the transition of the family's partnership with the institution. These meetings reinforce the importance of activities developed in preschool education for the training of students and draw attention to the negative impact of early schooling supported by studies such as those by Kern and Friedman (2008).

It is worth mentioning that the Covid-19 pandemic that occurred in 2020–2021 has made it impossible to monitor preschool children as reported in this text. The suspension of face-to-face classes has prevented direct contact with students, families, and partner institutions. The team responsible for the transition at the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School projects the need for more intensive monitoring of children, families, and future teachers throughout 2021–2022 in an attempt to minimise the potential impacts of social isolation.

The Challenges of School Transition in Waldorf Schools and the Brazilian Legislation

The Common National Curriculum Base (Brasil, Ministério da Educação, 2017) defines early childhood education as the beginning of the educational process. It is the space for the development of basic skills, described by the document as:

(...) the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (practical, cognitive, social and emotional), behaviours and values to solve complex demands of everyday life, full exercise of citizenship and work. (Brasil, Ministério da Educação, 2017, p. 8)

These competencies can develop from two main axes that structure the pedagogical practices within the scope of early childhood education: interaction and play. The educator's role is to offer children experiences that enable them to know themselves and each other and, establish relationships with nature and with their cultural context. The document describes the five fields of experience to be covered by the practices of early childhood education: one that encompasses the formation of one's own identity in relation to others and the expansion of their cultural references; a field dedicated to artistic experience that includes the possibility of self-expression; another field linked to free movement and corporal experimentation; the field of language development in speech, thought and imagination; and, finally, a field that allows the development of the notions of time and space, and the possibility of relating different objects.

The five fields of experience should enable children who finish the cycle of early childhood education to have the following skills: to be able to demonstrate empathy and confidence, to engage in attitudes of cooperation and mutual respect, showing interest in other cultures and ways of life; in the field of movement, being able to self-care, controlling their body in games and other activities, developing manual skills; be able to express themselves freely in activities such as painting and

drawing; being able to express ideas, desires and feelings through language; retelling stories; establish comparative relationships between objects, different materials, relate numbers and quantities; and be able to report important events about their own history and that of their family members. The Common National Curriculum Base (Brasil, Ministério da Educação, 2017) points out that the synthesis of learning should be indicative, not a condition of access to elementary education.

Waldorf kindergartens offer children the conditions to develop the skills mentioned above through their pedagogical principles. The problem experienced by Waldorf kindergartens in implementing the policies outlined in this document is the strict delimitation of the early childhood education age group, 4–5 years and 11 months, imposed by the national curriculum document.

Over the past few years, Waldorf schools and preschools have encountered difficulties in the transition from early childhood education to elementary education. The decrease from 3 to 2 years of the early childhood education cycle lowered the cut-off age group, forcing younger children to enter the first grade. In an attempt to maintain consistency with the child development and specific needs of each child, Waldorf schools have tried in various ways to ensure that the transition takes place at the right time, but the pressures from teaching supervisors² are high, and smaller institutions feel fragile in supporting a discussion about the need for their students to stay for another year in preschool.

One solution found by the schools was lawsuits brought by the parents, asking for the possibility of the child staying for another year in preschool. This solitary action resolves isolated situations and, despite the number of successful cases, there is no guarantee that the family will be able to stay. This alternative also highlights the country's social differences. Many families do not have the financial means to undertake processes such as lawsuits, and are unable to guarantee their children the experiences appropriate to their age group according to the pedagogy of their choice. This creates considerable tension, since the Brazilian Constitution (Brasil, 1988) guarantees parents' freedom in choosing the pedagogical proposal that best meets their needs.

In 2018, the Federal Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, 2018) decided the minimum age for entering elementary education for all children was 6 years, and applied to children who turn 6 before March 31. Although the decision was made to prevent the access of under-age students, in practice this made it very difficult to keep older children in preschool. The measure states that admission must take place *from* the age of 6, but has been interpreted as if admission should occur *at* the age of 6.

The Federation of Waldorf Schools in Brazil (FEWB) has promoted debates to discuss the topic with representatives of the federated schools. The objective is to propose a consultation with the National Education Council that allows maintaining the Waldorf pedagogy for transition between grades. At the same time, there is a

²Teaching supervisors are responsible for supervising and inspecting the educational institutions assigned to them, providing technical guidance and assisting in the correction of administrative and pedagogical flaws. (Governo do Estado de São Paulo – Diretoria Regional de Ensino, 2020)

concern about the loss of important experiences on the part of children in preschool with regard to the development of social and emotional skills, which have a great impact on their future life. This situation affects the country's contemporary childhood and demands a broader discussion on the part of society.

Final Considerations

It is understood that the experience of the Waldorf Rudolf Steiner School in monitoring the transition from preschool to elementary education can be replicated in other public or private school institutions in order to ensure a better reading of the legal documentation and respect for the autonomy of pedagogical proposals. The positive results of the experience of the last years demonstrate that the benefits of this support network, formed by collaborative work between several entities (families, teachers, and different school institutions), can be used in other educational contexts and become the object of future academic research.

It should also be noted that the discussion on the age range for admission to elementary education, according to the Waldorf pedagogy, encompasses issues of a broader scope for Brazilian education, highlighting the role of early childhood education in the development of social and emotional skills and in the establishment of a meaningful relationship with learning – which, it is believed, can be hindered in a poorly planned transition. Finally, an in-depth debate on this issue can change national public policies with positive impacts on the quality of contemporary childhood.

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