

MAIN LESSON BLOCK TEACHING IN THE WALDORF SCHOOL

Questions and Considerations

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When Rudolf Steiner inaugurated the first Waldorf school, he established the “main lesson”—a two-hour class during which all academic subjects except for foreign languages would be taught. The subjects taught in the main lesson were studied for block of time lasting from three to six or more weeks.

Teaching in main lesson blocks has become one of the most successful and distinguishing features of Waldorf education, for it allows teachers to cover the curriculum intensively and economically, and it provides the students with the fullest possible immersion in a subject. The students’ experience of the subject is further deepened by allowing the subject to “go to sleep,” before being “reawakened” later in the year or in the following year. Through this process of forgetting and remembering, students return to a subject with new interest and new insights. The time between the main lesson blocks in a subject allows students’ concepts to develop gradually and to mature. Knowledge needs time to take root, blossom, and bear fruit. The main lesson block assures that students have sufficient time to experience a living process of learning.

Questions regarding Block Teaching in the Waldorf School

Waldorf teachers have widely different ideas regarding the length of main lesson blocks. Some teachers primarily use four week blocks; others teach in blocks of as few as one or two weeks or as many as eight. Is the length of the main lesson block purely a matter of personal preference or calendar constraints, or can we distinguish “pedagogical laws” that affect the effect and effectiveness of blocks of different lengths? Rudolf Steiner expected Waldorf teachers to grapple with such issues and to come to their own conclusions borne out of their experience and reflection. In light of more than 80 years’ experience and research in Waldorf education, what has been discovered regarding the following questions?

Is there an ideal length for a main lesson block?

Do different subjects require main lesson blocks of different lengths?

What are the effects of working with longer or shorter main lesson blocks ?

Do children of different ages require main lesson blocks of different lengths?

Any consideration of these questions should include reference to Rudolf Steiner’s indications about the main lesson blocks. In various lectures from 1919 to 1924, Steiner described main lesson block being as long as a school term—three to four months—to as short as three weeks. Rudolf Steiner’s early descriptions refer to blocks significantly longer than his later descriptions. This raises the following additional questions:

Did Rudolf Steiner have a concept of an “ideal” length of a main lesson block which changed during the course of the years when main lesson blocks were being worked with in the Waldorf School?

Were the longer main lesson blocks described in the earliest references meant to be understood as belonging only in the context of teaching in the early grades?

Were the main lesson blocks shortened because of philosophical reasons, or did they prove impractical or difficult?

References to review periods at the end of the year cease after 1923. Is there a relationship between shorter main lesson blocks and the diminished need for review periods?

In order to facilitate further research into these questions, references to the main lesson blocks from Rudolf Steiner’s educational lectures are listed below in chronological order.

References to Main Lesson Blocks

Rudolf Steiner’s first reference to the intensive study of one subject for a period of time was in the second lecture of *Education as a Social Force*, (August 10, 1919, p. 40) where he spoke about studying arithmetic for two or three months.

In the first of the *Discussions with Teachers* (August 21, 1919, p. 21), Rudolf Steiner described main lesson blocks of six or eight weeks.

In the first of the *Faculty Meetings* (September 8, 1919, p. 2), Rudolf Steiner spoke about main lesson blocks that would last for an academic term, with a review period at the end of the year for each of the subjects to be taken up in shorter blocks.

In lecture 8 of *Soul Economy* (December 30, 1921, pp. 124-125), Rudolf Steiner described main lesson blocks lasting from four to six weeks, and he again mentioned the review period at the end of the year.

In *The Spiritual Ground of Education* (August 23, 1922, p. 96), Rudolf Steiner spoke about main lesson blocks of four to six weeks with a review period at the end of the year.

In *The Child's Changing Consciousness* (April 22, 1923, p. 183), Rudolf Steiner mentioned main lesson blocks lasting three to four weeks.

In *A Modern Art of Education* (August 14, 1923, pp. 161-162), Rudolf Steiner described main lesson blocks being “three, four or five weeks” or “five or six weeks” in length.

In a lecture entitled *Anthroposophy and Education* (November 14, 1923, p160) Rudolf Steiner mentioned main lesson blocks that were three to four weeks long.

In *Human Values in Education* (July 21, 1924, pp. 103-104), Rudolf Steiner described the main lesson as being four or five weeks.

In *The Kingdom of Childhood* (August 15, 1924 p.71), Rudolf Steiner spoke of main lesson blocks that were four to six weeks in length.

Summary

<i>Education as a Social Force</i> (1919)	2 – 3 months
<i>Discussions with Teachers</i> (1919)	6 – 8 weeks
<i>Faculty Meetings</i> (1919)	an academic term (appx. 3 months)
<i>Soul Economy</i> (1921)	4 – 6 weeks
<i>The Spiritual Ground of Education</i> (1922)	4 – 6 weeks
<i>The Child's Changing Consciousness</i> (1923)	3 – 4 weeks
<i>A Modern Art of Education</i> (1923)	3 – 6 weeks”
<i>Anthroposophy and Education</i> (1923)	3 – 4 weeks .
<i>Human Values in Education</i> (1924)	4 – 5 weeks.
<i>The Kingdom of Childhood</i> (1924)	4 – 6 weeks

Further Research Possibilities

The Waldorf Education Research Institute is very interested in pursuing research in the topic of rhythms of teaching and learning. Individual teachers or groups of teachers who are interested in participating in a colloquium or developing a research project to consider the questions raised in this article should contact Roberto Trostli, Co-Director, Waldorf Education Research Institute , 193 Bay Road, Hadley, MA 01035, phone: 413-587-0590, email: rtrostli@prodigy.net.