HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION: CZECH WALDORF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GRADUATES’ EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LESSONS

Katerina Dvorakova

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Abstract
This article is a follow-up to my study titled Foreign Language Instruction in Waldorf Elementary School: Students’ Views and Perceptions, published in the second issue of Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal in 2016. While the first paper dealt with Waldorf foreign language learning experience at elementary school as perceived by five of their graduates, the second one tracks the same group of students into their first semester of high school, and examines how they coped with the transition challenges. In an interview consisting of open-ended questions the participants were asked to describe and interpret their initial academic experience in foreign languages against the background of their Waldorf schooling.

Key words
Waldorf education, foreign language instruction, transition experience, high school

Introduction
Transition from elementary into high school is rarely a smooth and pleasant experience for young adolescents. As they enter high school, they encounter a larger, less personal, more competitive and grade-oriented environment with a greater diversity of teachers and peers. They are usually both excited and anxious about going to high school. On the one hand, they look forward to more freedom and more choice, as well as the opportunity to develop friendships. On the other hand, however, they are concerned about stricter teachers’ standards, more school work, decline in grades and even being bullied by older students (Mizzele and Irvin, 2000).

The following study presents a narrower observation of this process by examining the transition experiences of non-traditional elementary school graduates in one particular content area, namely that of foreign languages. It shows how Czech Waldorf elementary graduates attending mainly non-Waldorf high schools regard the changeover and how they come to grips with the challenges inherent in such transition.

The issue of how Waldorf school alumni cope in the “real world”, meaning outside its generally protective and supportive environment, is a common concern of most parents and perhaps the most frequently asked question of anyone enquiring about Waldorf pedagogy. Will they be well-prepared by their Waldorf school? How will they respond to entering a school with a significant difference in size, relationships, teaching approach and overall atmosphere? Will they be able to meet the academic standards and come to terms with all the social and emotional demands?

An extensive study concerning the academic and social challenges in the transition of Waldorf graduates to high school in the USA was published by Lawton (2016). He found that the most significant challenge academically concerned not any academic content itself, but adjusting to different instructional methods. The difference was viewed as a move from an emphasis on relational or analogical understandings in the Waldorf school to the reproduction of discreet facts in high school. Changes in learning styles included for example a decrease in opportunities for artistic and experiential learning. The most significant challenge socially was establishing a sense
of belonging by integrating into the high school social structure. In an analysis involving students’ comparisons of their new high school experiences with their former Waldorf background, participants found their personal connection to academic material waning. At the same time, they discovered new, more extrinsic motivations and reported feeling invigorated by achieving good grades, even though they found grades generally one-dimensional as measures of value. None of the interviewees in this study reported being unprepared in any specific content area.

Some of the fundamental principles behind the Waldorf concept of foreign language instruction have been outlined in my previous paper (Dvorakova, 2016). The Waldorf approach attempts to address the human being in keeping with the dispositions and needs of the respective developmental stages, and it always takes into account the whole being, i.e. not only the intellect, but also the domains of feeling and volition. All Waldorf teaching, including that of foreign languages, is to be artistic because, as an experienced high-school teacher and teacher trainer Lutzker (2007:461) puts it, “artistic processes lead to significant personal developments”. He also maintains that viewing foreign language teaching as an art rules out an approach based entirely on following a course book, where texts are chosen in accordance with a grammar and vocabulary-based syllabus and not by the potential meaning and value of their content. Such approach renders the establishment of genuine inner connection to the material that could become the basis for meaningful personal development nearly impossible for the pupils (as well as the teachers).

By the time students enter high school, they are well into puberty. According to Steiner (2003:219), that is the period in life when “a completely different being emerges, born out of a new relationship with the world. It is no good appealing to the students’ previous sense of authority; now they will demand reasons for all that is expected of them”. In puberty, young people become rather sensitive to the attitudes and judgements of teachers, perceiving their weaknesses and shortcomings. For educators of adolescents this implies that the way to captivate them and earn their respect is by “the sheer weight of their indisputable knowledge and expertise and by providing waterproof reasons for everything they do or expect of their students”. Such a relationship between the students and the teachers will result in “the students’s healthy growth into the true that was given to them by the spiritual world as a kind of inheritance, so that they can merge with, grow together with, the beautiful in the right way, so that they can learn the good in the world of the senses, the good they are to develop and bring to expression during their lives” (Steiner 2012:23).

In the Czech Republic, there are currently fourteen Waldorf elementary schools but only four high schools. Thus, many of the elementary graduates will continue their secondary education in other types of schools. This also means that they do not get to experience the whole of the Waldorf curriculum, which spans over twelve years, and cannot fully benefit from it.

Research
The research is based on interviews carried out with five Waldorf elementary school graduates in February 2016, i.e. immediately after their first semester at high school. Its aim is to ascertain how they handled their transition from elementary school to high school in the content area of foreign languages. Further objectives of the study were to find out how they perceived their preparedness to study at a higher level educational institution, the differences in the approach to instruction and their degree of satisfaction. The interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions and they were held in the participants’ mother tongue.

The interviewees were the same students who had participated in the first part of the research - three girls (Adela, Barbora, Tereza) and two boys (Krystof, Simon), all...
aged 16 at the time of the interviews. Adela, Barbora, Tereza and Simon started attending a state grammar school (a so-called “gymnasium”) in Ceske Budejovice and Krystof became a student of the Waldorf Lyceum in Prague. All their new curricula include the study of two foreign languages. Adela, Tereza, Simon and Krystof chose to study the same ones, i.e. English and German, while Barbora decided to take up beginner Spanish instead of continuing to learn German.

As elementary pupils they had all been assessed as keen and gifted foreign language learners. All five of them had generally very positive attitudes to foreign language learning and excellent or very good results in these subjects throughout their studies. After their first semester at high school, Adela and Barbora earned As from both languages, Tereza earned an A from German and a B from English, Simon earned an A from English and a B from German and finally Krystof received a B from English and a C from German.

**Question 1: Could you briefly describe how foreign languages are taught at your new high school?**

**ADELA:** There is a lot of emphasis on grammar and a lot of textbook activities. We do quite a bit of listening. In German, we have to study a lot. We sometimes practise speaking in our English lesson, but most of the time is taken up by filling out various vocabulary exercises. Our teacher is very demanding; she says things like *There is going to be a test on vocabulary from units one to six next week*. That’s a lot of words, but on the other hand I have a feeling that I have learned a lot this past semester. We do not use the textbook much; instead we have various additional materials like texts for reading or translation activities.

**BARBORA:** Our Spanish course is for complete beginners. The teacher is young, energetic and he knows what he is talking about because he spent several years in Madrid. He is really enthusiastic. There is something special in every lesson. We do have a textbook, but he brings all kinds of extra materials, listening texts, videos, we do presentations. I enjoy learning Spanish and it is a lot of fun for me. But English *(sigh)* has been such a disappointment. I have a feeling that we haven’t moved a single step forward since the beginning of the year. I haven’t had to study anything on my own, not even for a test and that is so annoying because I just sit and look out of the window during lessons. Every lesson, really every single lesson starts the same way: *Hello, stand up, let’s start working*, and we open the books and start. There is no communication and I don’t feel that the teacher would be interested in us in any way. When we read a text, she asks questions just about the content of the article. We never had any extra material, there are only two pages of notes in my notebook, no new vocabulary. We just fill in and tick in our workbooks.

**KRYSSTOF:** We greet each other in German with a special poem, and the teacher says what we are going to do and practise. We learn new vocabulary, answer questions, do grammar and read articles. Some lessons contain individual work.

**TEREZA:** We have a textbook in our English lessons. First, we always study the vocabulary and after about a week write a test on it. We usually spend two to three weeks on every unit to do all the exercises, but we never do conversation. As far as German is concerned, it’s more or less the same, but we sometimes work with extra materials.

**SIMON:** Let me first talk about English, which is great. We do a lot of pair work and discussions, e.g. at the beginning of a week we talk about our weekend or about the events of the upcoming week. Of course, we also write tests on grammar and vocabulary. Sometimes we have bigger topics like e.g. *Jobs*, during which we work in groups and use extra materials. We also use a textbook and our teacher often corrects our mistakes to help us learn to speak correctly. Our German lessons are based only on the textbook and the teacher speaks German all the time.
**Question 2: What do you think is the main aim of foreign language lessons at your new school?**

ADELA: The main aim in English is to prepare us for the final school-leaving exam. The teacher quite strictly follows the exam topics. Our German teacher is a bit like a German – she is never late, she is very strict, so she probably wants us to be ready for tough life conditions (laughter). We do drills, but we also get assigned some creative writing tasks.

BARBORA: In English, we are probably supposed to get to a level to pass the final school-leaving exam, but honestly, I don’t think it’s possible with our teacher. I imagine that we will have covered all the grammar by then but we are not learning to speak at all. In Spanish, we should be between A1 and A2 by the end of the year. I think that’s a realistic goal because the teacher is really capable of making us enthusiastic about studying.

KRYSZTOF: The first half of the year was mainly revision and from now on we are going to learn new things.

TERESA: I would say that our English teacher just cares about getting us to the end of our studies. Our German teacher pays a lot more attention to conversation and we can feel that she enjoys her work more and that she cares about us and our results.

SIMON: For English, it’s definitely to teach us speak the language and learn to use it practically in daily life. But the second group has a different teacher with a different approach and all that matters to her is the final school-leaving exam. So, we are a lot better off. In German, I feel that it is more important for our teacher to practise the language for real communication.

**Question 3: How well prepared for your high-school studies do you feel to be from your elementary school? What are your strengths and weaknesses in comparison with your classmates?**

ADELA: I have been allocated to the stronger groups in both languages. I don’t perceive any weaknesses in comparison with my classmates. I am more confident in speaking than some of the people in my class. I was a bit afraid about listening activities because we did not use recordings much in my previous school, but I don’t have any difficulties in this area either.

BARBORA: There is one girl at a similar level like me, we both scored B2 in a test. Am I prepared? I am but if our lessons continue in the same way, I will have to do something about it, maybe take private lessons. In Spanish, we are all beginners, so there are no differences at the moment.

KRYSZTOF: I am one of the better students in English and I feel confident. In German I am a bit behind, but it is my personal problem because I never did particularly well in German. But I am keeping pace and it is slowly getting better.

TERESA: I had done a lot more in German than most of my classmates. The same goes for English.

SIMON: I was well prepared from English, perhaps the only downside was my not so wide vocabulary. In German I kind of know everything but I am not very good at it.

**Question 4: Does your new school live up to your expectations?**

ADELA: I think it is what I expected. … I was hoping, though, to have more opportunities to develop our foreign language skills, which is not yet happening. Actually, we have just found out about an exchange programme with German students. That could be great.

BARBORA: I tried to do something about the situation in my English lessons. I even discussed it with my class teacher, but the English teacher just suggested that we read a book during lessons or something like that. Obviously, we don’t do that because we want to be together with the rest of the class. So, I suggested that we could do...
presentations, but her reply was negative, stressing that \textit{we need to cover the stuff in the book and there is no extra time}. I just don’t know what to do about it.

KRYS'TOF: I didn’t really have any special expectations. I thought it would be similar to my elementary school, but it’s not.

TEREZA: I am disappointed in English because it is just boring, only the textbook, and what is worse, no conversation. In German I am pleased that we have started with a lot of revision and I am successful.

SIMON: With English, it’s above my expectations, I am absolutely satisfied and I enjoy the lessons thoroughly. I didn’t have any special expectations about German.

\textbf{Question 5: Have you been introduced to any new and interesting techniques or ways of learning a foreign language? Is there anything you miss from elementary school that you no longer can do?}

ADELA: Our German textbook is interesting, there is a lot of room for communication and not so much grammar, vocabulary is clearly organized, and it is easy for me to learn from it. The negative thing is that we are too attached to the textbooks in general. I really miss those creative activities and presentations. Our lessons now are quite stereotypical.

BARBORA: I miss everything about my English lessons from elementary school. In Spanish I find everything interesting, it is a bit similar to the way we learned at elementary. We cannot hold discussions in Spanish yet, but we are able to express quite a few things.

KRYS'TOF: Our lessons are not so different, but we don’t sing and we don’t do poetry, which is something I miss because we used to learn a lot from that.

TEREZA: I miss speaking most of all. Textbooks are new for me and the positive thing about them is that it is clear what I need to know, like vocabulary and stuff. But there are no other advantages because teachers are too attached to them and they don’t do any other activities.

SIMON: I find English very similar. One interesting thing for me was that we tried to do a mock final exam to see how difficult it was and surprisingly, I did quite well. I also enjoy one home task – to watch a video on TED talks and report about it in class. I’ve found that really useful because I needed to understand an unknown person. I do miss the songs in English.

\textbf{Question 6: What resources and materials do you use in your foreign language lessons and how useful do you consider them to be?}

ADELA: The CD player for listening, there are native speakers on the recordings, that’s useful. In German, we have those additional materials on vocabulary and grammar.

BARBORA: In Spanish, we have textbooks, worksheets, videos, listening activities, songs. In English, it’s just the book and listening activities. We haven’t had single homework, which is something I just don’t get. It’s got to do with the teacher because in other classes at our school it’s different, they do lots of interesting things, dialogues and even homework which I had complained about before but now I really miss it.

KRYS'TOF: We have our own book and worksheets. I think that’s perfectly sufficient.

TEREZA: Mainly the textbooks.

SIMON: Textbooks and our notebooks, in English we sometimes watch videos and do extra worksheets.

\textbf{Question 7: How are you assessed in your foreign language lessons? Does assessment affect your relationship to the subjects?}
ADELA: In German, we had really a lot of different marks and my average was 1.49, so I had to write a final test to defend my A. All that matters in English are tests. We didn’t write so many of them, there is a tight time limit and the marking is strict – one missing letter is considered to be a serious mistake. I’m quite sorry about that because I like the subject, I like to learn it, but there is not enough time to show what I know and on top that I cannot even check my answers when I finish. Then I get points off for stupid mistakes I hadn’t had enough time to correct. That’s disappointing for me, but luckily, I did get an A.

BARBORA: I’m happy about every A I get from Spanish because it’s a new subject and the good mark tells me that I’m doing well. We only had three marks from English, two tests and some kind of speaking based on the textbook. I had As from all of them. Three marks from a subject each semester is a minimum at my school, so I hope that we will do more.

KRISTOF: My results were fluctuating and they could have been better. We have narrative evaluation as well as marks, I got a B in English and a C in German. Our assessment was based on tests and involvement in class activities.

TEREZA: We only have tests in English – about four per semester on vocabulary and four on grammar. In German, we are sometimes assessed on the basis of our involvement in class or voluntary homework, but they have lower weight. I don’t like English at all now, but it’s not because of the marks but mainly because of the way we are taught.

SIMON: I got a B from German simply because I don’t like the language. So even if I got a D, it wouldn’t change anything, and nothing would probably change even if I got an A. I had an A in English. We had a very complex assessment based on a presentation, bonus tasks, involvement in class, tests and essays. The only thing I consider to be assessed too strictly are vocabulary tests. I’m glad I had an A, but I don’t know how a B would affect me, whether it would make me more motivated or less. What matters most to me is that I’m enjoying the lessons.

Question 8: What do you find most interesting in your lessons?

ADELA: Whenever we can practise speaking.

BARBORA: When the teacher is enthusiastic and you can tell that he or she does it because they enjoy it, not just because they get paid for it.

KRISTOF: All the fun activities.

TEREZA: Speaking because it’s most important. But unfortunately, we don’t do any of it in our English lessons. When I asked about it, I was told that I could prepare some kind of a presentation. But you know my classmates are actually quite satisfied with the fact that they don’t have to do much.

SIMON: I like the English lesson as a whole, it’s fun and we all enjoy it. I don’t find anything appealing in my German lessons, that’s not good. Perhaps there is one thing – it’s not so strict when compared with some other subjects.

Question 9: What do you find least interesting in your lessons?

ADELA: The tests. We usually have to cram for it and then write it in the tests. Couldn’t our knowledge be revealed in any other way?

BARBORA: English as a whole, and I’m terribly sorry about it.

KRISTOF: New grammar.

TEREZA: I know that we have to learn grammar, but I don’t enjoy it. I would much rather speak in lessons because I find it much more important.

SIMON: Learning English vocabulary. I love discussing things and topics, but I don’t enjoy learning the words. In German it’s the language, it’s just not pleasant for my ears.
Question 10: How would you describe your relationship to the subject now?
ADELA: My relationship to foreign languages is the same – very positive, but not so much to the school subjects anymore.
BARBORA: Still positive. I like Spanish at school and I keep up my English by watching movies. I’ve liked foreign languages since I was a little girl and this won’t change. But school has disappointed me in this respect.
KRYS TOF: I like foreign languages the same way, it hasn’t changed. I prefer English a bit because it’s easier for me, but I’ve started getting better in German, as I had already mentioned.
TEREZA: I’m quite satisfied in German lessons and dissatisfied in English because it’s always the same stuff, boring and monotonous.
SIMON: I enjoyed English lessons at my elementary school and I still do at high school, I look forward to them. Well, I wasn’t keen on German at elementary and it’s more or less the same here.

Discussion
The five students experience their transition to high school in very different ways. Their mid-term grades and the responses from the interviews show that they are all coping with the academic challenges of their new schools rather well, but their level of satisfaction varies a great deal. Simon is extremely satisfied, especially with his English lessons. A wide variety of activities and evaluation techniques, focus on using a foreign language for real communication, good atmosphere in the class, and a supportive teacher were the most highly-esteemed features of his new approach. Krystof, the only student continuing in Waldorf education, is mostly satisfied though lagging a bit behind in German. All the three girls have earned excellent results and found their German or Spanish classes quite (Adela and Tereza) or very (Barbora) satisfactory, but have also been profoundly disappointed by their English lessons. Their criticism centres around the following aspects of their instruction:

- overuse of textbooks: There is a lot of emphasis on grammar and a lot of textbook activities. (Adela), We never had any extra material, there are only two pages of notes in my notebook, no new vocabulary. (Barbora), I am disappointed in English because it is just boring, only the textbook and what is worse, no conversation. (Tereza), Textbooks are new for me and the positive thing about them is that it is clear what I need to know, like vocabulary and stuff. But there are no other advantages because teachers are too attached to them and don’t do any other activities. (Tereza)

- lack of speaking activities: We sometimes practise speaking in our English lesson, but most of the time is taken up by filling out various exercises. (Adela), I imagine that we will have covered all the grammar by then (i.e. by the end of their studies) but we are not learning to speak at all. (Barbora), I miss speaking most of all. (Tereza)

- the indifference of the teachers to the students as well as the content area: I don’t feel that the teacher would be interested in us in any way. (Barbora), I would say that our English teacher just cares about getting us to the end of our studies. Our German teacher pays a lot more attention to conversation and we can feel that she enjoys her work more and that she cares about us and our results. (Tereza)

Barbora also feels frustrated about not having enough to do in class, not making enough progress, and about not being able to do anything about the situation in spite of attempting to initiate changes. Nonetheless, despite their decline in interest and...
engagement, they all maintained their motivation to do well academically and achieve good grades. Additionally, we can observe in these five students’ transition experiences some of the phenomena reported in Lawton’s (2016) study:

- The main academic challenge is not the content but different methods of instruction. In German, we have to learn a lot of vocabulary. Our teacher is very demanding; she says things like “There is going to be a test on vocabulary from units one to six next week”. (Adela), First, we always study the vocabulary and after about a week write a test on it. We usually spend two to three weeks on every unit to do all the exercises, but we never do conversation. (Tereza).

- There is a greater focus on the reproductions of facts. Couldn’t our knowledge be revealed in any other way? (Adela complaining about being assessed solely on the basis of tests), When we read a text, she asks questions just about the content of the article. (Barbora).

- There is a decrease in opportunities for artistic and experiential learning (reported also by Krystof who was attending a Waldorf high school!). The negative thing is that we are too attached to the textbooks in general. I really miss those creative activities and presentations. Our lessons now are quite stereotypical. (Adela), We just fill in and tick in our workbooks. (Barbora), Our lessons are not so different, but we don’t sing and we don’t do poetry, which is something I miss because we used to learn a lot from that. (Krystof), I do miss the songs in English. (Simon)

- Personal connection to academic material waning. My relationship to foreign languages is the same – very positive, but not so much to the school subjects anymore. (Adela), I’ve liked foreign languages since I was a little girl and this won’t change. But school has disappointed me in this respect. (Barbora), I don’t like English at all now, but it’s not because of the marks but mainly because of the way we are taught. (Tereza)

- Feeling invigorated by achieving good grades. I’m happy about every A I get from Spanish because it’s a new subject and the good mark tells me that I’m doing well. (Barbora)

- Grading is found one-dimensional as a measure of value. All that matters in English are tests. … I’m quite sorry about that because I like the subject, I like to learn it, but there is not enough time to show what I know and on top that I cannot even check my answers when I finish. (Adela) I’m glad I had an A, but I don’t know how a B would affect me, whether it would make me more motivated or less. What matters most to me is that I’m enjoying the lessons. (Simon)

- No one felt unprepared. I have been allocated to the stronger groups in both languages. I don’t perceive any weaknesses in comparison with my classmates. I am more confident in speaking than some of the people in my class. (Adela), I had done a lot more in German than most of my classmates. The same goes for English. (Tereza), I was well prepared from English, perhaps the only downside was my not so wide vocabulary. In German I kind of know everything but I am not very good at it. (Simon)

**Conclusion**
In my previous paper, I focused on how Waldorf students viewed and perceived their foreign language instruction throughout their nine years of elementary schooling. This
follow-up study extends the story and provides a snapshot of the high-school transition of these five graduates in which they describe and interpret how they have grasped the initial academic challenges and differences in their foreign language lessons. It was designed to learn and bring to light how these students experienced and made meaning of this major change. While the findings cannot by any means be generalized to any transitioning Waldorf student, they will conceivably provide valuable input to educators as well as families and the general public.

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Mgr. Kateřina Dvořáková, Ph.D.
Faculty of Education, Department of English
University of South Bohemia
Jeronýmová 10
371 15 České Budějovice
Czech Republic
katerina@pf.jcu.cz

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