

The learner perspective on the Waldorf class teacher system – *an exploratory study*

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ABSTRACT. The class teacher period from class 1 to 8 is one of the fundamental concepts in Waldorf Education. Nevertheless it has been discussed recently with respect to the question of contemporary adequacy. This fact has motivated High School students of the Landesschülerrat in Hessen to initiate a survey in respect of the following aspects: 1. Retrospective evaluation of the time spent with the class teacher; 2. Teacher-student relationship; 3. Learning in classroom (especially in the 8th grade); 4. Transition to High School; and 5. Evaluation of selected subjects. The article reviews the findings of an explorative study in the term 2011/2012 and it is based on a data set of 423 students.

Keywords: Class teacher, Waldorf School, teacher-student relationship, learning in classroom, transition to High School

Introduction

The first number of the journal “Erziehungskunst” for 2014 was devoted to the theme of “the class teacher”, viewed from a variety of perspectives (e.g., historical and anthroposophical background, theory and practical experience, etc.). The reason for this was probably tied in with the fact that within the Waldorf school movement there is currently a debate going on as to whether the traditional 8-year class teacher period, as practised for the last 90 years – whereby one teacher takes on all the subjects for one class, usually in the form of main lesson blocks (e.g., Eller 2007) – is still in tune with the times. Some Waldorf schools, faced with teachers unable to cope, some classes unmanageable through their size and the diversity of their composition, parental pressure towards more individual attention etc., have already abandoned this principle and gone their own way. Among the various pathways chosen are reduction of the class teacher period to 5 or 6 years, the bringing in of specialist teachers already in the middle school, in some cases to enable team-teaching, splitting a class at the end of class 4 (e.g., 2 X 24), or moving learners around a group of teachers (the so-called Bochum mobile classroom model). Evidently something that has been an unquestioned component of the Waldorf curriculum for decades – and largely still is – has begun to shift.

The question as to whether the traditional eight-year principle still fits into the modern world has been raised also by members of the Regional Student Representative Council of Waldorf schools in Hessen (*Landesschülerrat*). This arose out of personal experience of class teachers and consequent doubts about their supposed competence in all subjects. Their need to challenge the class-teacher principle also had to do with the question of whether they were adequately prepared for the level of academic achievement demanded of them later. Thus it was that in 2011 they asked the Alanus University whether they, in co-operation with its Education Department, might carry out a study of the class teacher system in Waldorf schools. For this purpose they wished to design a questionnaire to be circulated to all their co-students from classes 9 to 13 in all the Waldorf schools in Hessen. The findings of this study are the subject of this article.

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A number of empirical studies of the class teacher period already exist. In Barz and Randoll's school-leaver survey (2007), for instance, 74% of those former Waldorf students sampled approved of the eight-year idea, although the younger their age the less positive their replies. Similarly, in the study "*Bildungserfahrungen an Waldorfschulen*" by Liebenwein, Barz and Randoll (2012) almost two-thirds of the 827 high-school students surveyed felt that eight years with their class teacher was a good thing. It is worth noting that "only" 69% of the sample had been through the whole eight years, while in 26% of cases there had been a change of class teacher along the way. In less than 2% of cases was the overall period of only 5 or 6 years' duration. Nevertheless, 80% said they experienced the class teacher's lessons as "interesting", and 79% were of the opinion that the class teacher made efforts to further every student's progress in the process of learning. However, almost 60% would also have liked more lessons from specialist subject teachers – in other words, high school teachers – in class 8, and more than half felt that over the years it was not good to have had so many subjects taught by only one teacher.

In their DFG-supported research project, Helsper and Ulrich (2007) have managed, on the basis of a number of case studies, and drawing upon a variety of information sources (systematic observations, interviews etc.), to reconstruct scenarios of both successful and unsuccessful relationships and interactions between class teachers and students. In addition to the theoretical background of the 8-year class-teacher principle and the pedagogical intentions of the teachers observed and interviewed, the mutual expectations and demands teachers and students bring to bear on each other were all systematically analysed, contrasted and reproduced in detail. The idea was that all this would yield insight into the qualities of the various relationships involved. Just what potentialities and risks are inherent in such a long attachment to one individual teacher, and how many-layered and personalised are the conditions for success or otherwise in such a long-standing relationship were all rendered abundantly clear.

All this implies that empirical investigation of the class-teacher period in Waldorf schools involves not only an assessment of its proper duration, but above all poses the question of quality; for example, the quality of teaching and of the teacher-pupil relationship at various age-levels. In evaluating this, the consideration of content and methods are equally important. In the present exploratory study the attempt has been made to do justice to these aspects. Thus the focus on the transition from class 8 to the high school was particularly strong. The findings have, of themselves, generated important insights for the training and further training of class teachers.¹

1. The Sample

This study is based upon a survey carried out in the academic year 2011/12 by the *Landesschülerrat* of Hessen. Prompted by their own experience, the council members' concern was to learn more about the class teacher system practised in Waldorf schools. The specific areas they wished to focus on were those of teacher-pupil relationships, the class teachers' level of competence in the various subjects taught, the transition to the high school and whether the students had been adequately prepared or the level of academic performance later required.

The questionnaire used (view under www.alanus.edu) was devised together with the student members of the *Landesschülerrat*. Apart from requests for personal details, it consists of 37 direct-answer questions, plus two allowing for an expansive answer. Some items were taken from the questionnaire used in another study: *Bildungs-erfahrungen an Waldorfschulen* by Liebenwein, Barz and Randoll (2012).

"*Inside the class-teacher-system in Waldorfschulen*" – the questionnaire thus devised (in German: "*Fragebogen zum Erleben der Klassenlehrerzeit an Waldorfschulen*") – was filled in and returned by 423 students of classes 9 to 13 from five Waldorf schools in Hessen. This figure, compared to the overall number of high school students for 2011/12 in these schools, represents a return of 28.2%. Since 5 classes (9-13) in each of these schools took part, it can be assumed that the findings relate to at least 25 class-teachers.

1. At this point we would like to express our gratitude to *Pädagogische Forschungsstelle of the Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen* for their financial support.

It must therefore be admitted that this study is based upon a random sample and cannot be regarded as representative. Nevertheless, this does not prevent it from spicing up the debate on the class-teacher system. In particular, the examples of open answers presented in section 5 afford a variety of perspectives on the long-term prospects for the class teacher system.

Of the students who participated in the survey 42.5% were male and 56.3% female. Among the class teachers there was a slight preponderance of males (50%) over females (43.1%). By way of comparison, in Randall's survey (2013) of 1807 Waldorf teachers from 115 schools the proportion of females was 61.2% - significantly higher than in the present study.

The distribution of the sample among the various classes is shown in Figure 1.

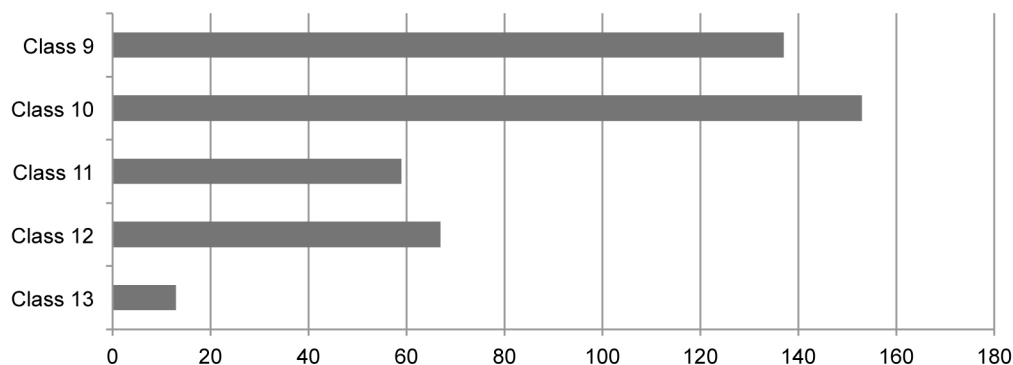


Figure 1: Distribution of the sample among the various classes (absolute values)

At the time of the survey fully two thirds (67.1%) of the students were in classes 9 and 10, whereas only 16 completed questionnaires were received from class 13 students. For this reason this age-group has not been included in the detailed quantitative analysis of specific classes.

In this sample the proportion of students aiming for the *Abitur* (German equivalent of A-levels) was 83.2%. If those wishing to finish school with a vocational qualification (Ger.: *Fachhochschulreife*) are added in, the figure goes up to 88.1%. This confirms a tendency already pointed out by Barz and Randall (2007) and Liebenwein, Barz and Randall (2012), namely, that Waldorf schools today are largely attended by students whose parents have high educational aspirations. Only 5.1% indicated that they wished to leave school with the equivalent of O-levels (an exam called the *Mittlere Reife*).

In a nation-wide survey by Keller (2008) based upon a census of Waldorf schools carried out in 2003/4 a high rate of late-entrants – especially in classes 4 and 5 – became apparent. The overall figure for classes 1 to 5 lay at 14.03% of the total pupil numbers (Keller 2008, p. 78). The proportion of late-entrants in the present sample is shown in Figure 2, arranged according to the classes in which they entered the Waldorf school.

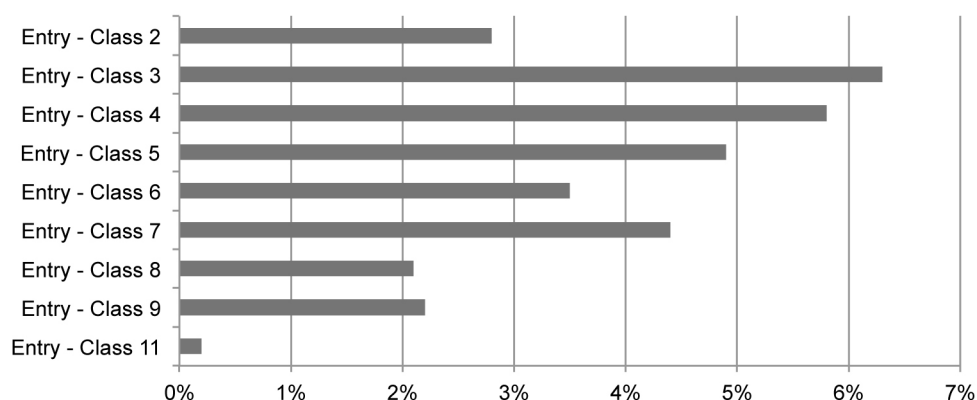


Figure 2: Proportion of late-entrants

Thus roughly every third student who participated in this study was a late-entrant; in other words, they did not begin their Waldorf career in class 1, but first experienced some other form of school – mostly a regular state school. The largest number of late entries occurred in classes 3, 4 and 5.

The question as to how long lessons continued to be given by the class teacher received the following response: in 39.8% of cases there was a change of teacher during the class-teacher period, whereas 57.2% were with one class-teacher over the full 8 years. Then 82.9% indicated that the class-teacher period lasted till the end of class 8, and 7.2% end of class 7, regardless of whether there was a change of teacher. In 4.4% of cases the period lasted only until the end of class 6.

2. Results

The questionnaire was divided into the following sections: 1. Retrospective assessment of the class-teacher period; 2. Teacher-pupil relationship; 3. The culture of learning (chiefly in reference to class 8); 4. Transition to the high-school; 5. Lesson quality, in relation to the question of whether particular subjects were taught by class- or specialist-teachers. These thematic headings will be dealt with in separate sections in what follows. Insofar as significant average differences exist between various partial samples, the data have been sorted according to, for example, class, gender, late-entrant status, as well as approvers and critics of the eight-year principle. In the sections that follow the results of the factor analysis undertaken will be presented, then a comparison between these findings and those of the study by Liebenwein et. al. (2012), plus the analysis of the answers to the open questions.

2.1 Retrospective assessment of the class-teacher period

Altogether 57.2% of the students in the survey felt, in looking back, that the duration of the class-teacher period was appropriate. 37.0% (N=160), on the other hand, felt eight-year period was too long. Of those who had been through a full eight-year cycle 63.2% also felt it was the right length. The reasons for approval or criticism of the 8-year principle will be discussed below.

2.2 Relationship to the class teacher

The students were asked about their relationship to their teacher under the headings “role model”, “trust” and “supportive understanding based on experience” – explicitly in relation to their time in class 8. Figure three shows the mean values obtained for each category.

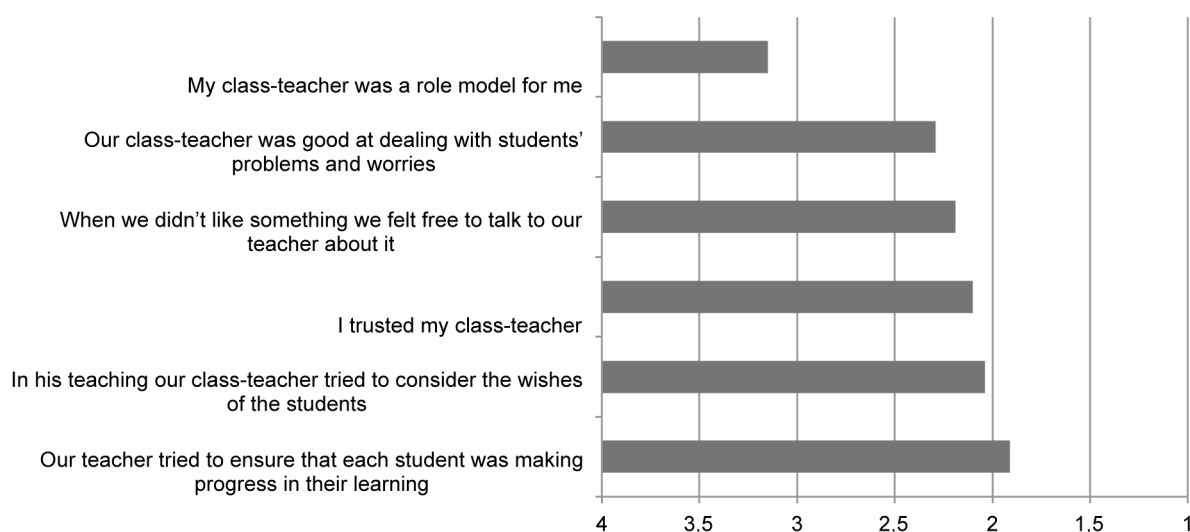


Figure 3: Relationship to class teacher in class 8 (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree)

The retrospective assessment of the relationship to the class-teacher – with particular reference to class 8(!) – tended towards the positive end of the scale. The responses, in fact, clustered around the “mostly agree” category. It is also clear, however, that by class 8 the class teacher was no longer much of a role model for the majority of students. The explanation for this most probably lies in the increasing independence of mind and strong individualisation tendencies the students display at this stage of their development. The upshot of this is a corresponding disengagement from the class teacher as a primary authority figure.

In Figure 4 the data for the student-teacher relationship are shown again, but divided into those who found the class-teacher period was the right length, and those who found it too long.

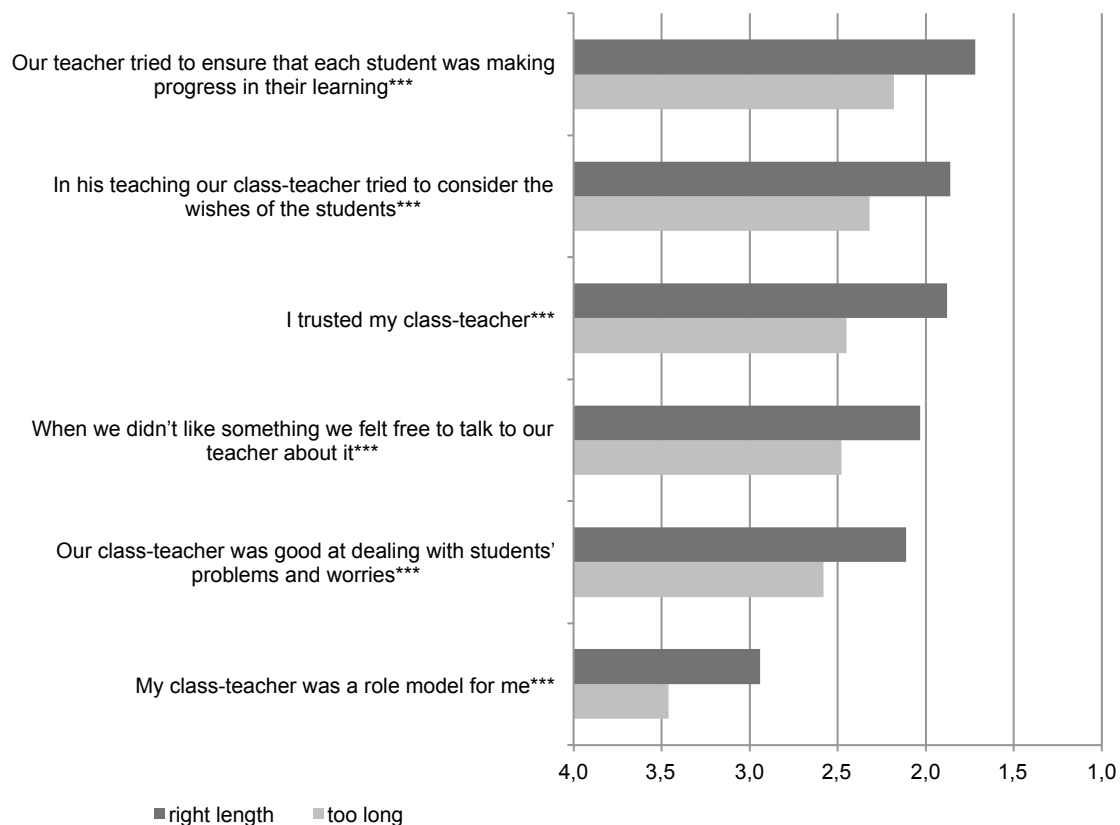


Figure 4: Relationship to class-teacher data, divided according to pro and contra the 8-year principle (Scale of mean values running from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree; *** means $p < 0.001$)

The verdicts of the approvers ($N=247$) and critics ($N=160$) of the 8-year class-teacher principle diverge markedly on the questions to do with the teacher-pupil relationship ($p < 0.0001$). The approvers value in teachers their capacity to provide individual support and attention, their openness to student complaints, their ability to deal with personal problems of the students much more positively than those who find the 8 years too long. Thus it would seem that acceptance of the principle depends more (approvers) or less (critics) upon the teacher's actual performance, his perceived capacity for support, his personality, and upon aspects such as sympathy and antipathy.

In the following figure the responses of classes 9 to 12 with regard to the relationship to the class teacher in class 8 are shown.²

2. Class 13 were not included here, as the number of responses from them was too small ($N=16$).

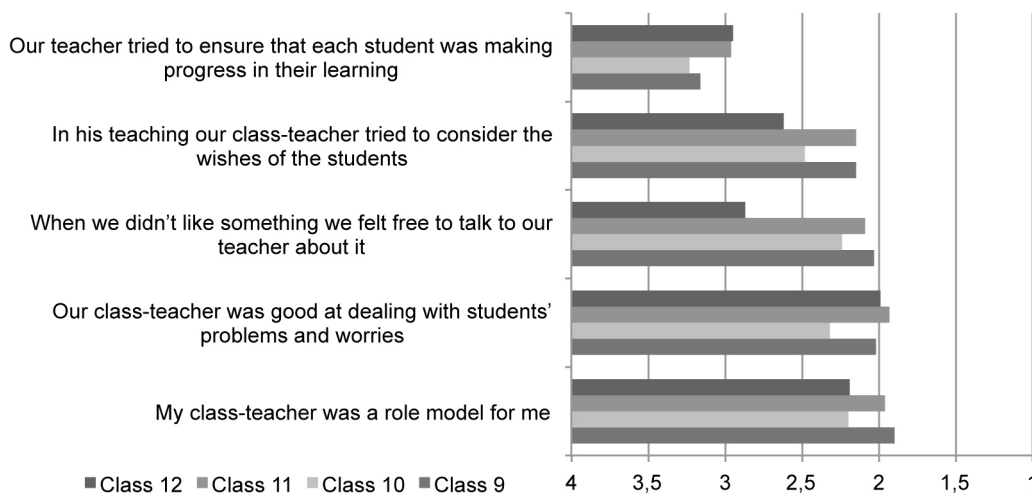


Figure 5: Relationship to class teacher, differentiated according to classes (Scale of mean values running from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree).

The findings reproduced in Figure 5 must be viewed with caution, in that the sub-samples of classes 11 (N=59) and 12 (N=63) are comparatively small. This may be the reason why the opinions of class 12 in regard to the class teacher’s ability to deal with students’ personal problems and his openness in the face of student criticism have tended to be more critical than those of class 9. On the trust and (with slight reservations) role model questions the differences in mean values between the various classes appear to be minimal.

In the case of the “class teacher gender” variable – on account of the sample’s very low N value the result can only be taken very cautiously as a tendency – the mean values in respect of the degree of trust between teachers and students came out as follows: male students had a more positive attitude to male teachers, and vice versa. According to this we could expect students to bestow more trust upon teachers who are the same gender as themselves, and less upon those of the opposite gender.

2.3. Questions on the culture of learning in class 8

In Figure 6 the findings on these questions are shown.

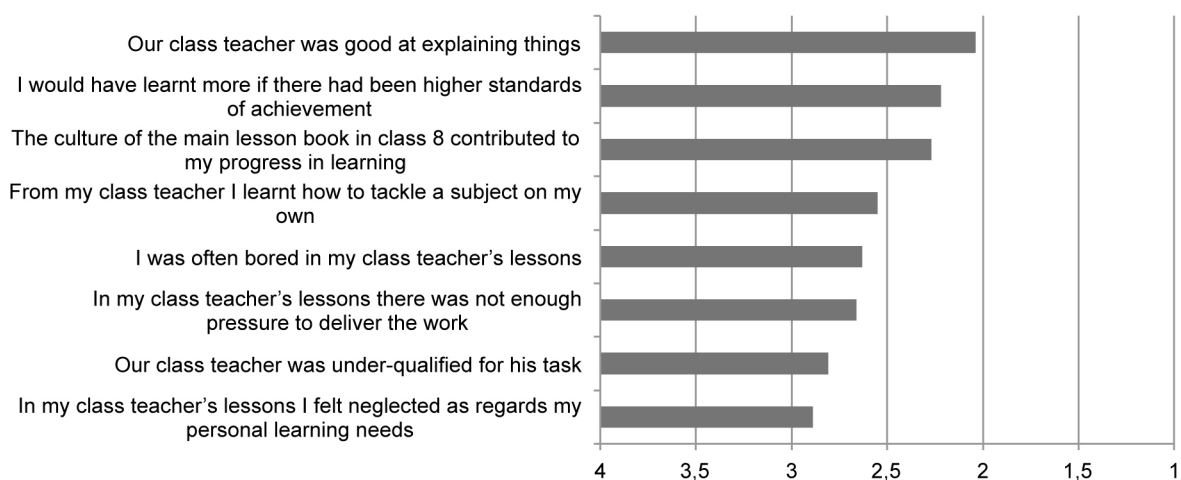


Figure 6: Culture of learning in class 8 – level of progress (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree)

The majority of students found that their class teacher was good at explaining the content of class 8 lessons (answers tended towards the “mostly agree” area of the scale). However, a quarter were of the opinion that in terms of knowledge the teacher was out of his depth in class 8. Moreover, about one third felt both that too little was demanded of them and that their learning needs were insufficiently attended to. Also about 60% agreed with the statement that they would have learnt more if the teacher had demanded higher standards of achievement. Finally, about 40% of high school students said that they had been bored in the class teacher’s lessons in class eight. As would be expected, between encouraging learning and demanding achievement there is a clear statistical correlation ($r = 0.59$). This implies that demanding too little very likely leaves many students bored in class.

A particularly critical eye was thrown upon the lack of guidance in the direction of self-motivated learning in the class teacher’s lessons: only 36.9% said that they had been shown by their class teacher how to work their way into a particular subject independently (only 10% “fully agreed” here). It would seem that class teachers in Waldorf schools place too little value upon teaching their students how to work and learn on their own – here, of course, we are referring to the situation in class 8. Other studies have also remarked upon this, although not solely in reference to teaching in class 8 (e.g., Liebenwein, Barz & Randoll 2012; Harslem & Randoll 2013).

In the following figure the findings just presented have been arranged in terms of approvers and critics of the eight year system.

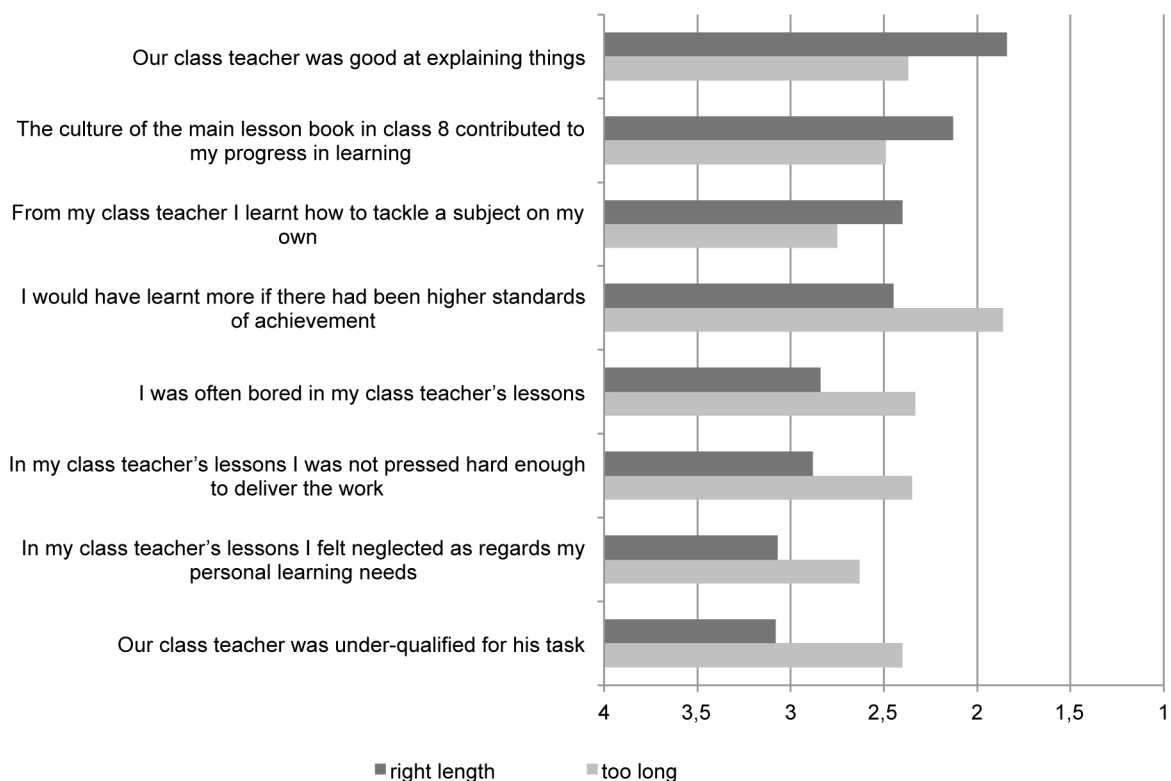


Figure 7: The culture of learning data, divided according to pro and contra the 8-year system (scale of mean values from 4 = “disagree” to 1 = “fully agree”; *** means: $p < 0.001$)

Under the “culture of learning” heading the picture is the same as before: the responses of those in favour of the eight-year system are more positive in those areas where such a response would be expected. In contrast, those who find it too long have a generally more critical attitude (as, for instance, in their verdict on the teacher’s standards of achievement).

A further aspect of this “culture of learning” section deals with questions concerning subtleties of method and overall lesson structure. The relevant findings are reproduced in Figure 8.

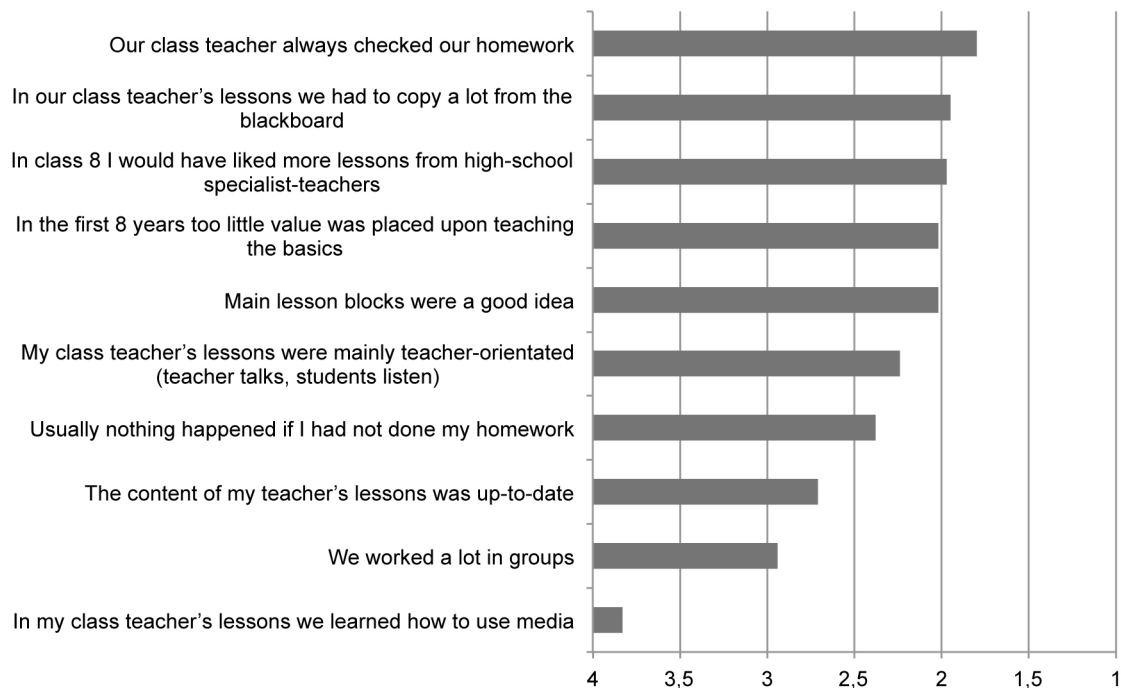


Figure 8: Aspects of teaching method (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree)

The students' verdicts on teaching method tend towards the critical end of the scale. Thus lessons in class 8 were retrospectively designated by over 60% ("fully agree"/"mostly agree") as mostly teacher-orientated. Only 20% gave a positive response on the question of group work. What's more, 70% agreed that in class 8 they had to copy a lot from the blackboard. Two thirds are also of the opinion that their teacher placed too little value upon the systematic teaching of basics, while only about a third experienced or perceived the class 8 lesson content as relevant to the present. Finally, over 70% agree with the statement that they would have liked to have been taught more often in class 8 by specialist-teachers from the high school.

The students' opinions are especially critical in the area of media usage. Only 3% (!) agree with the statement that in their class teacher's lessons they learned how to work with electronic media. The responses here bear witness to the extremely reserved attitude of class teachers in Waldorf schools to employing electronic media in the classroom.

On the other hand, the attitude to teaching being done in main lesson blocks was generally positive, or at least reasonably so. Indeed, a good 60% felt that doing a main lesson book benefitted their progress in learning. This particularly applies to female students.

The picture that emerged in relation to homework was contradictory: on the one hand, 80% indicated that their class teacher paid close attention to whether their homework had been accomplished. On the other hand, about every second student expressed the opinion that usually on occasions when homework had not been done there were no consequences. Thus it would seem that while class 8 teachers were keenly interested in homework outcomes, they were relatively easygoing in relation to missing homework.

When the focus is placed upon the sub-set of late-entrants, in particular those students who first entered the Waldorf school in class 5 or later (this refers to 16.2% or N = 69 of those surveyed) the following tendencies are observed in their answers: late-entrants (from class 5 on) are generally less positive ($p < 0.05$) in their opinion of the class teacher's attention to individual learning needs than those present since class one. Moreover, late-entrants agree significantly more often ($p < 0.05$) with the statement that the class teacher's lessons were mostly teacher-orientated. Thus, Waldorf students with experience of other forms of school – presumably among them ordinary state schools – are more likely to perceive the class teacher's lessons as teacher-dominated than students who have no such experience.

In Figure 9 the findings on “methodological effectiveness” have been re-arranged in relation to the proportions of approvers and critics of the 8-year system.

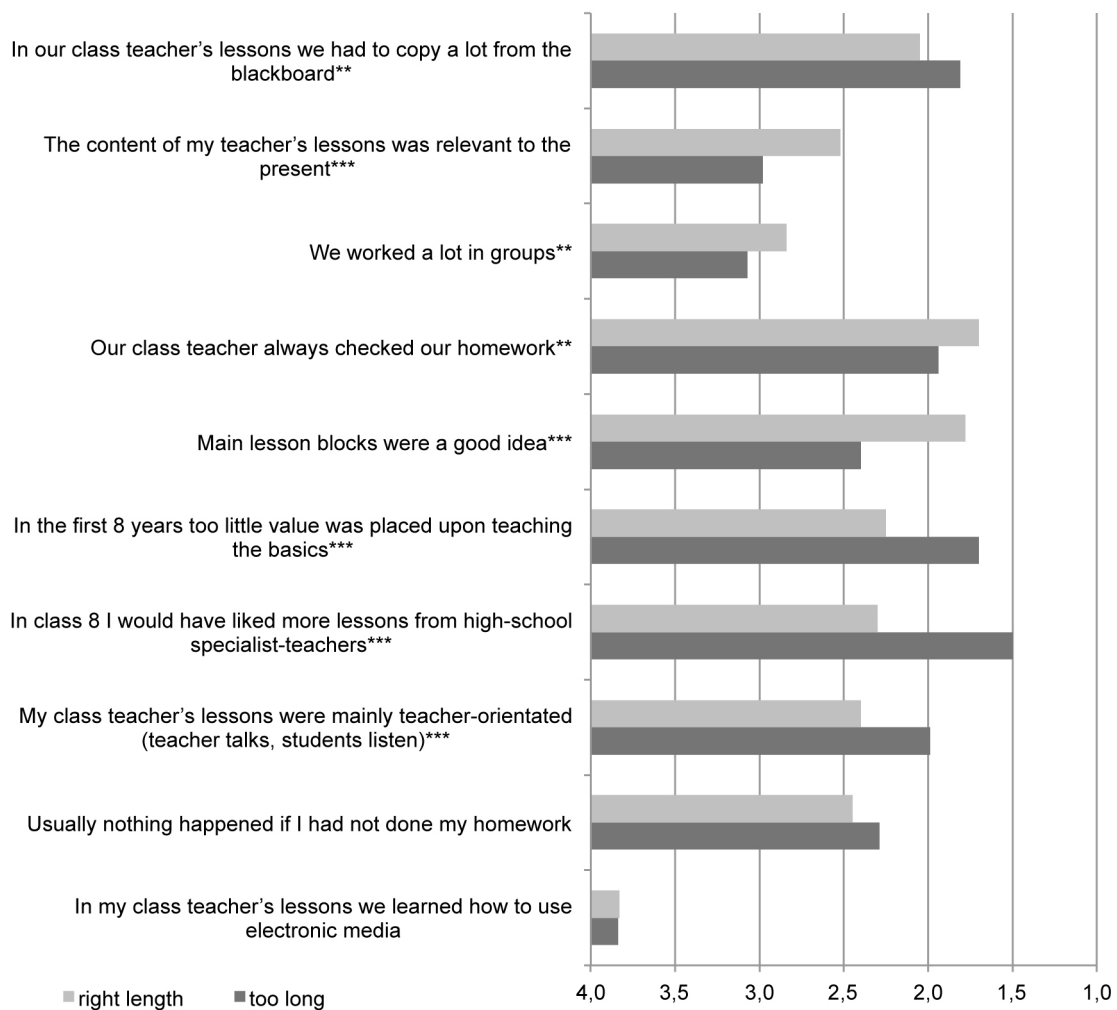


Figure 9: Opinions on “methodological effectiveness” divided according to those pro and contra the 8-year system (scale of mean values from 4 = “disagree” to 1 = “fully agree”; *** means: $p < 0.001$; ** means: $p < 0.005$)

As can be seen from Figure 9, the answers of the critics of the 8-year system in the areas of “main lesson blocks”, “learning the basics”, “more lessons from high-school specialist-teachers”, “teacher-dominated lessons”, “copying from the blackboard”, “contemporary relevance of content”, and “frequency of group work” are rather more reserved than those of the approvers. In contrast, the electronic media question was answered negatively by the majority from both sub-samples.

In relation to the variable “particular classes” the mean values re-arranged themselves as follows (see Figure 10): In looking back, class 12 students were slightly less critical of the learning situation than those from classes 9, 10 and 11. Particularly striking is the fact that class 12 students, who are about to embark upon their *Abitur*, found the statement that the class teacher paid insufficient heed to their learning needs less applicable to themselves than did those of classes 9, 10 and 11.

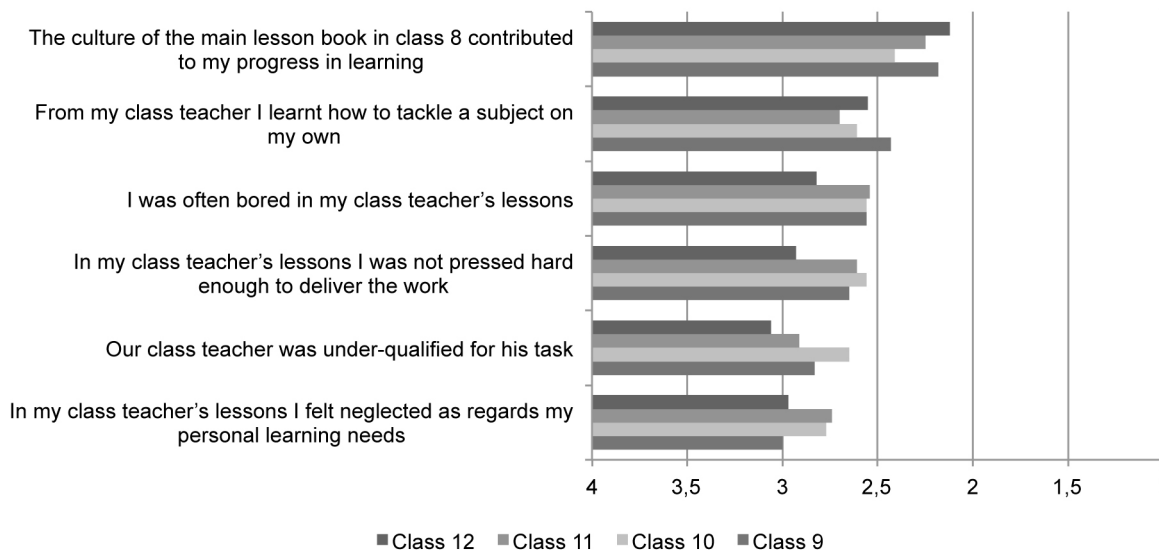


Figure 10: Culture of learning, arranged according to different classes (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree)

Under this heading two questions have given rise to significant mean-value differences in relation to gender. Thus, more females are of the opinion that fashioning a main lesson book contributed to their learning progress in class 8. In addition, more females feel that they would have learnt more if the teacher had applied higher standards of achievement.

2.4 Transition to the high school

A further set of topics revolves around the students' experience of the increase in academic pressure that accompanies the transition from class 8 to class 9. In contrast the results presented in the previous sections, here the approvers and critics of the 8-year system are more or less of one mind. Only in the response to one statement – “In class 8 I was inadequately prepared for what awaited me in the high school” – was there a significant divergence between the two sub-samples: 48.1% (mean value 2.5) of those in favour of the 8-year system more or less agreed, while for those against the figure was 56.1% (mean value 2.1). In Figure 11 the mean values for all questions around the theme of transition to the high school are reproduced.

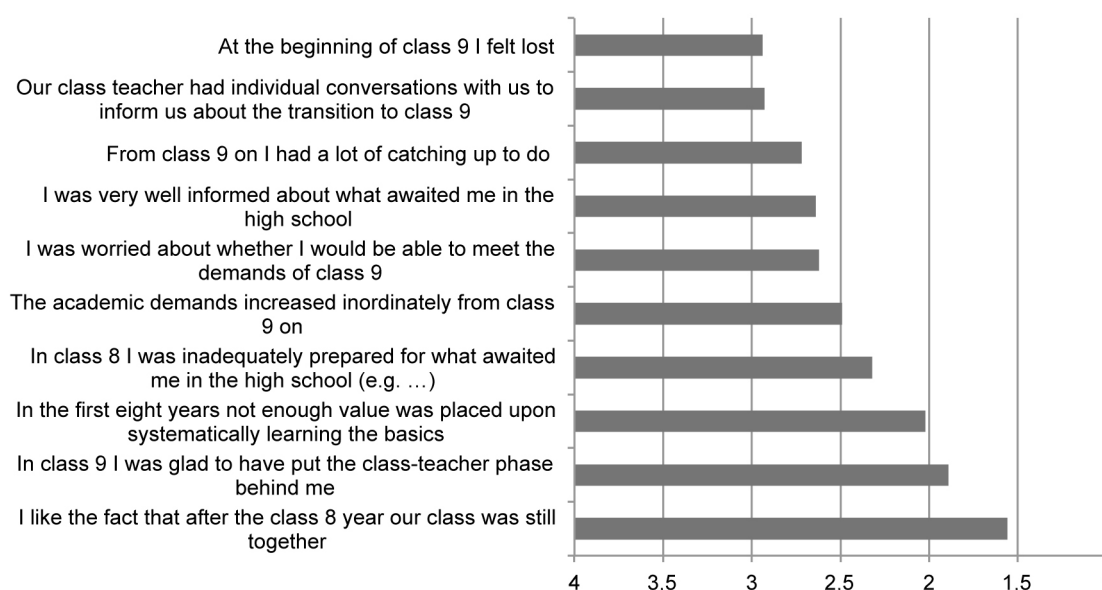


Figure 11: Responses on the transition to the high school (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree)

About three quarters of those surveyed (73.5%) were glad to have their time with their class teacher behind them. Looking back, 90% liked the fact that after the class eight year the class was still together. Evidently for the students the persistence of the class community beyond class 8 is important.

Further findings on the transition to the high school are: More than half of the students felt inadequately prepared in class 8 for the transition to the high school, and only 34% answered that they had had individual conversations about the high school with their class teacher. Around 40% purported to have been well informed about what awaited them in the high school. Thus it is no surprise that 44% recalled having been anxious about their ability to meet the demands of class 9, while about one third reported having felt lost at the beginning of class 9. These findings clearly indicate that the high school preparation process is in need of improvement.

Other outcomes on this theme show that every second high school student experienced the increase in academic demands from class 9 on as extreme.³ Moreover, more than a third agreed with the statement that in class 9 they had to make considerable efforts to fill gaps in their knowledge. This should be viewed in connection with the fact that Waldorf students more often avail themselves of extra lessons in the high school than students in regular schools. It may be that this is justified by the students in terms of their need to catch up on background knowledge (cf. Barz & Randoll, 2007; Liebenwein, Barz & Randoll, 2012; Peters, 2014).

As shown in Figure 12, the transition from the class teacher period to the high school is perceived rather more dramatically by the older students (classes 10, 11 and 12) than by the younger ones in class 9. It is probably safe to assume that this more critical attitude has to do with the increasing academic pressure in the higher classes, whereas in class 9 it may well be that the students have not yet become concretely aware of the increasing standards of achievement.

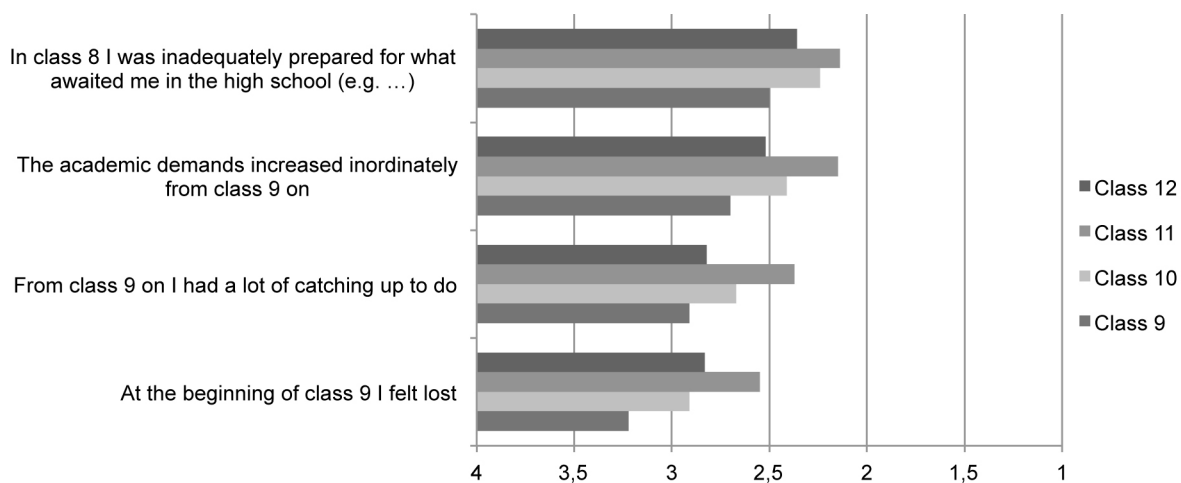


Figure 12: Transition to the high school, arranged according to classes (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree).

2.5 Class-teachers versus specialist-teachers in the comparative evaluation of various subjects

In the second part of the questionnaire the students were asked to evaluate the quality of teaching in various subjects in class 8. The question was formulated as follows: *How do you rate the quality of teaching in class 8 in the following subjects?* The possible answer categories were 1 = “very good”, 2 = “quite good”, 3 = “not very good”, 4 = “not good at all”. In addition they were asked whether the particular subject was taught by the class teacher or by a specialist teacher. The idea here was to find out whether certain subjects are better taught by a specialist- or a class-teacher.

3. Between the experience of an inordinate increase in academic pressure and that of feeling lost from class 9 on there is a correlation of $r = 0.65$.

In Figure 13 the mean values obtained for every subject are shown, in this first instance regardless of who did the teaching.

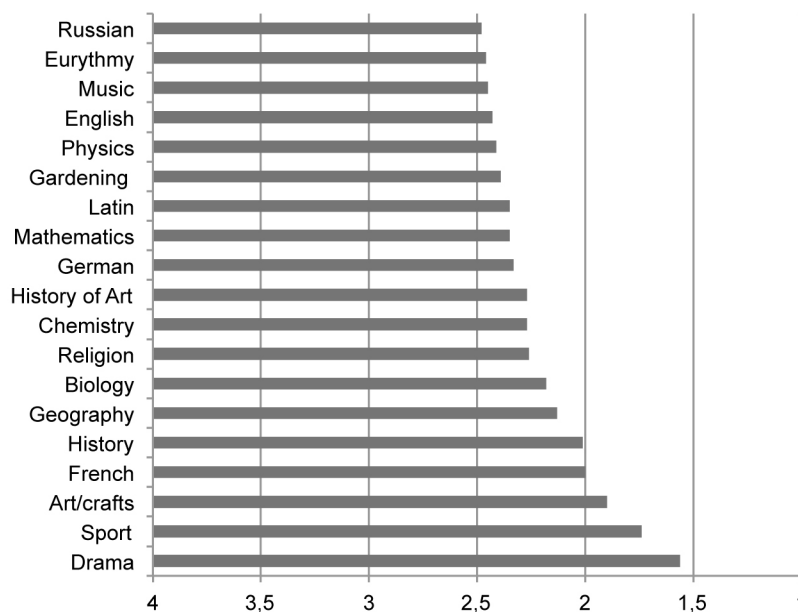


Figure 13: Responses to the question: *How do you rate the quality of teaching in class 8 in the following subjects?* (mean values on the following scale: 4 = “not good at all”, 3 = “not very good”, 2 = “quite good”, 1 = “very good”)

The quality of teaching in class 8 was retrospectively rated as “good” to “quite good” in the subjects “drama”, “sport”, “art/crafts”, “history” and “French”. 8 other subjects, by contrast, tended towards the rating “not very good”. The spectrum runs from German via English to Russian (although the last was less often on offer or chosen). Music and eurythmy also had a similar rating.

In Table 1 the findings have been re-sorted to take account of whether the particular subject was taught by a class teacher or a specialist teacher. Only those subjects have been listed, which were rated by more than 20 students.

Table 1: *How do you rate the quality of teaching in class 8 in the following subjects?*

FACH	no. of ratings	“very good”/“good”	“very good”/“good” (taught by class teacher)	“very good”/“good” (taught by specialist teacher)
Drama	273	91,2%	86,1%	92,7%
History	355	76,9%	73,8%	80,4%
Geography	342	73,1%	73,3%	72,8%
Biology	344	68,6%	69,0%	68,2%
Chemistry	356	63,7%	59,7%*	66,9%*
German	353	62,0%	58,8%(*) ⁴	64,9%(*)
Mathematics	362	60,5%	62,9%	57,9%
Physics	369	56,4%	54,0%	58,0%

* = T-test significant ($p < 0.05$)

The only significant differences evident here are in the subjects chemistry and German. This implies that the teaching in these two subjects tended to be rated more positively when it was done by a specialist teacher. Comparable, although not statistically significant, tendencies are apparent in the case of physics, history and

drama. The opinions on geography and biology, however, are markedly similar. In contrast, the picture in relation to mathematics teaching (although still not statistically significant) comes out in favour of the class teacher. In this connection it is worth recalling that 70.4% of the students surveyed expressed a wish for more lessons from specialist teachers in class 8.

3. Factor analysis

For the questions on “Quality of teaching in class 8” and on the “Transition to the high school” a factor analysis was undertaken. To this end four factors were chosen, each of which was represented by four of the statements used in the questionnaire (see Table 2). Only coefficients above 0.50 were considered.

Table 2: Factor analysis

Factor I: Relationship to class teacher	
Coefficient	statement
0,67	I trusted my class-teacher
0,64	In his teaching our class-teacher tried to consider the wishes of the students
0,67	Our class-teacher was good at dealing with students' problems and worries
0,62	My class-teacher was a role model for me
Factor II: Care given and pressure applied by the class teacher	
Coefficient	statement
0,65	Our class teacher was good at explaining things
-0,59	In my class teacher's lessons I felt neglected as regards my personal learning needs (negative)
0,52	From my class teacher I learnt how to tackle a subject on my own
-0,52-	I would have learnt more if there had been higher standards of achievement (negative)
Factor III: Main lesson methodology in class 8	
Coefficient	statement
0,51	We worked a lot in groups
-0,53	In our class teacher's lessons we had to copy a lot from the blackboard (coded negatively)
-0,54	My class teacher's lessons were mainly teacher-orientated (teacher talks, students listen) (coded negatively)
0,62	In my class teacher's lessons we learned how to use electronic media
Factor IV: Increasing academic pressure in the transition to the high school	
Coefficient	statement
0,75	At the beginning of class 9 I felt lost
0,72	The academic demands increased inordinately from class 9 on
0,79	From class 9 on I had a lot of catching up to do
0,71	In class 8 I was inadequately prepared for what awaited me in the high school

Between the 2 factors “Caring and applying pressure” and “relationship to class teacher” there is a reasonable correlation ($r = 0.53$), whereas between “relationship to class teacher” and “teaching methodology” as between “teaching methodology” and “caring and applying pressure” the correlations are weak. It would seem, therefore, that the relationship to their teacher in connection with their individual learning needs means more to the students than whatever teaching methods he might choose, however tried and tested.

In Figure 14 the mean values obtained from placing the critics and approvers of the 8-year system in relation to these four factors are presented.

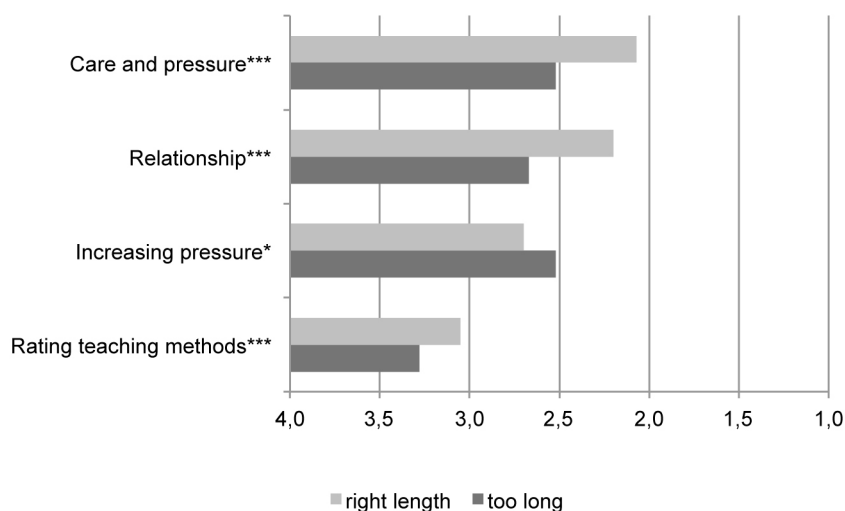


Figure 14: Factors relating to class 8 and to the transition to the high school according to pro and contra the 8-year system (mean values in a scale running from 4 = disagree (negative rating) to 1 = fully agree (positive rating)⁴; *** means: $p < 0.001$ and * means: $p < 0.05$)

This once again makes clear that, in the class 8 context, those in favour of the 8-year principle evaluate both the personal relationship to the class teacher and the teacher's caring attention to their learning needs as well as his application of standards of achievement more positively than those against it. The same goes for the attitude to teaching methods. In the matter of increasing academic pressure, however, there are only marginal statistical differences between the two groups. This implies that from the student perspective the inordinate increase in academic pressure from class 9 onward has no direct connection with the length of the class teacher period.

When the data are re-arranged according to class groups (see Figure 15), the following picture emerges: Of the chosen factors "increasing academic pressure" is the only one that turns out to have a less critical rating among the higher classes. This increase in the levels of achievement required with the transition from class 8 to 9 is thus particularly significant for the students of class 9. As the students get older – as already mentioned above – it seems that a change of attitude (in the sense of an adaptation) to the pressures of academic achievement comes into play. This also speaks in favour of improving both the process of transition from middle to high school and the preparation for it.

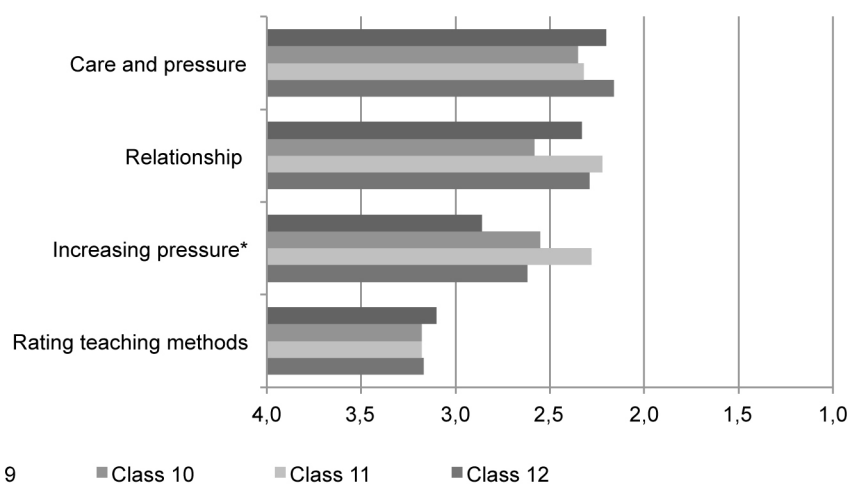


Figure 15: Factors relating to class 8 and to the transition to the high school arranged according to different classes (mean values in a scale running from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree; * means: $p < 0.05$)

4. Here certain single items were re-coded.

4. Comparison with the study on Waldorf students by Liebenwein, Barz and Randoll (2012)

Some of the questions placed before the students in this study were taken from the research project “Bildungserfahrungen an Waldorfschulen” led by Dirk Randoll (Liebenwein, Barz & Randoll, 2012). This was based on a survey of 827 Waldorf students from classes 9 to 13 in all the provinces of Germany. Figure 16 presents the mean values for the questions that were formulated identically in both studies.

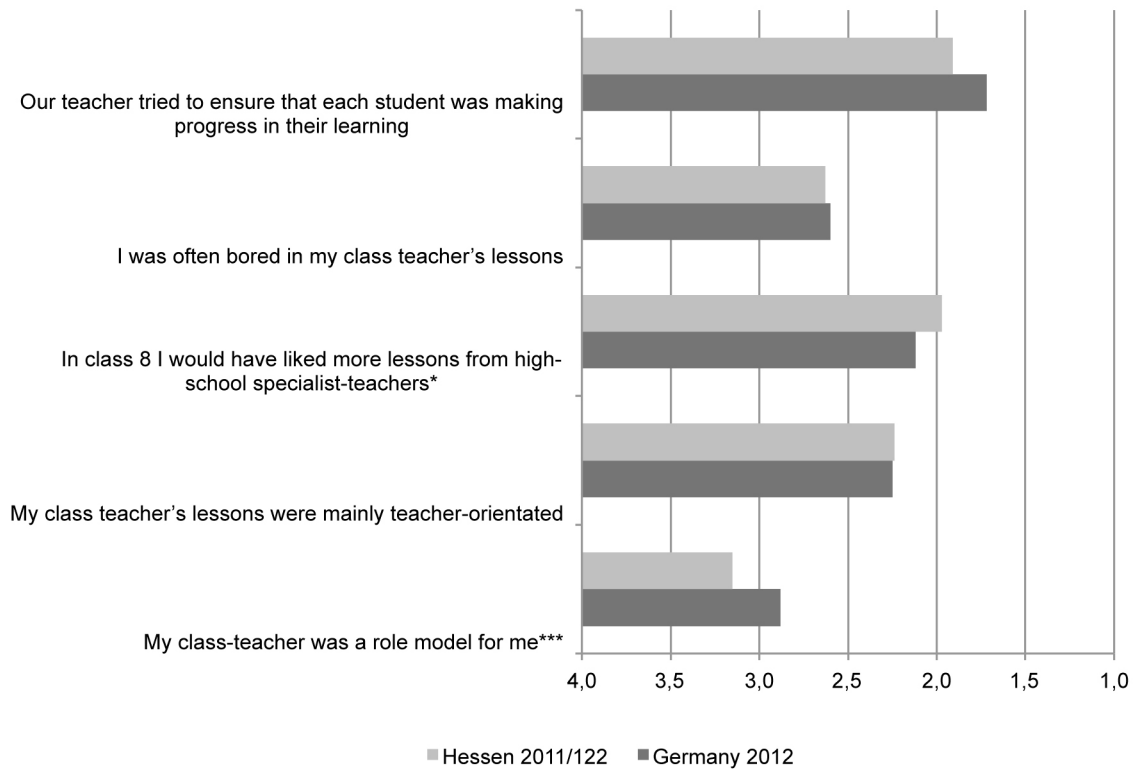


Figure 16: Comparison of particular details in this study with the way they appeared in the study by Liebenwein, Barz and Randoll (2012). (scale of mean values from 4 = disagree to 1 = fully agree).

The opinions of the Hessen students are more critical in relation to the teacher's efforts to ensure that each student was making progress in their learning and to the teacher as role model than those of the students in the nationwide survey. Otherwise the results are largely similar, which is an indicator of the reliability of this present study.

5. Answers to the open questions

Of the 423 high school students who took part in the survey 309 submitted answers to the more open, expansive questions. The basic question was: “When you think back to your time in the primary school with your class teacher, what do you feel was positive about it, and what negative?” Then there was scope for adding further “comments”. The hope was that whatever was expressed would either substantiate some of the contents of the questionnaire or else add something relevant to the quantitative results. However, these open answers – in contrast to most of the direct-answer questions – were not only concerned with class 8. The students were much more inclined to comment upon the class teacher principle in relation to the years preceding this. This created a wide range of attitudes, providing much matter for discussion.

In what the students have written the “positive” standpoints cannot always be clearly distinguished from the “negative” ones. Rather, they tend to repeat, complement or dilute each other. In other words, there is a

great deal of overlap, especially between what was said under the heading “negative”, and what was expressed as a “comment”. In view of all this, the numbers given here can at best only be regarded as tendencies. Under “class teacher positive” 277 answers were received, under “class teacher negative” 275, and under “comment” 112. In addition, 10 students commented on what they thought was the point of the questionnaire.

The change of class teacher was expressly mentioned 11 times by class 9 students, twice by class 10 students, 5 times by class 11 students and once by class 12 – in other words, 19 times in all.

The number of students who answered the open questions is distributed over the various classes as follows:

Class 9	N = 98
Class 10	N = 105
Class 11	N = 41
Class 12	N = 52
Class 13	N = 13

Time with class teacher “positive”

Under “positive” the evaluations of their time in the primary school with their class teacher were, indeed, almost all positive. The points felt as positive were that during this time there was: a fixed *central reference figure*, no change of teacher, no adjusting to new circumstances, a person of trust, security, protectiveness, companionship, a good teacher-pupil relationship, a teacher who knew the strengths and weaknesses of the children, someone to turn to for help, a listener, carer, a teacher who contributed much to the creation of a good class community.

Examples:

Class 9

- “Looking back, I really like the fact that in the early years (ca. classes 1-4) the teacher didn’t change from year to year.”
- “We were always accompanied by one teacher, who knew us really well, and there was no chance of being overlooked and going under.”
- “There was one teacher one could depend on when there were problems.”
- “We did so many things together, and this makes the class community strong.”

Class 10

- “I was able to enjoy my childhood”
- “The main thing for me was the close relationship to the teacher, who was almost like a second father.”
- “We had a well-sheltered time, did a lot of painting.”

Class 11

- “More chance to “be a child” up to class 5, and one teacher for everything.”
- “The 8 years with the class teacher felt very secure and intimate (almost like a family).”
- “Up to class 5: could be a child, one teacher for everything, no drive for achievement yet, no pressure.”
- “Then I felt it was wonderful to have a “class mother”, but looking back on it I would say there were some shortcomings in her training.”

- A “comment”, that describes the class teacher period as follows: *“I think the class teacher idea is a good thing, but it’s important to realise when it no longer works. To be totally fed up with him in class eight, I think, is normal and not all that negative – by that time you’re dying to get into the high school. I think it would be sensible to let high school teachers do some of the teaching, for class teachers can’t be up to scratch in all subjects.”*

Class 13

- *“Was a cool time – nothing negative about it! Then came this “comment”: “The class teacher system is the way to go.”*

Further aspects that were viewed as positive had to do with *specific classroom activities and whole-class events*, such as the class play (especially highly commended) class trips, excursions, main lessons (and main lesson books) and lack of academic pressure.

Examples:

Class 9

- “The fact that we had main lessons was very good, for they allowed you to really concentrate on each subject!”
- “The class 8 main lesson books were a great help to me in class 9.”
- “We had the chance to do bicycle tours. Hikes to the lake in class 4.”
- “Always the same lesson structure.”
- “It was good that there was not so much academic pressure.”
- “Teaching usually good, sometimes too much writing.”
- “The form of the lessons.”

Class 10

- “What was positive was that we stuck to one teaching principle and weren’t subjected to a confusing variety of teaching methods.”

Class 11

- “Little pressure – in other words, more relaxed learning. Right up to class 8, very good all the way with the main lessons and the class teacher principle.”

Declared as positive in addition to all this were: no detention, no marks, albeit each only appeared by name once. This could be because these Waldorf principles are taken for granted and so are not thought worthy of mention, nor, of course, do they have any direct bearing on the class teacher theme.

Modifications of the positive view of the class teacher

The positive standpoints – as is apparent from some of the above quotations – are diluted in a variety of ways under the heading “negative” and in the “comments”. Reservations are formulated, which view the 8-year class teacher period in the Waldorf school in a way that is both sophisticated and critical.

In their answers to the open questions only a very few students (N=25) directly express their considered approval of the class teacher system.

*Examples:**Class 9*

- I think the class teacher period is very important, since it creates a very good relationship of trust” ...
- “I think it is very good to have the same teacher for eight years. In this person the class has an anchor and a leader and thus has the chance to become a real community.”
- “For me it was good having the one teacher up to class 7; after that I began to feel the need for new teachers.”

Across the board *who the teacher is as a person* is stressed as the key ingredient in the situation. In this same context some students (N=42) feel that the success or otherwise of the teacher-pupil relationship is the decisive factor. If there is a problem in this area the verdict on the class teacher period comes out negative.

*Examples:**Class 10*

- “If you have a problem with your teacher you can’t really avoid him – you just have to “put up with him” every day.”
- “Either you get on with the teacher, or you’ve just been dealt a bad hand.”

Besides these general observations, some high school students (11 of 42) – like those in other types of school - have referred to more specific things, such as being hurt, treated unfairly, humiliated, or put in a particular “box” (“once you’re in it’s hard to get out”). These are all instances in which the students feel they were let down, victims of inappropriate behaviour, which damaged the delicate state of communication between teacher and pupils.

A large majority of these comments by the students spoke in favour of *shortening the class teacher period*. On the question of the proper *length of the class teacher period*, however, there were different ideas. Suggestions ranged from placing the break-off point at the end of class 5, class 6 or class 7. It was clear, however, that at the very least a specialist teacher should be brought in to increase the standards of knowledge in class 8 teaching. Overall the wish for such a change of teacher was expressed 19 times.

*Examples:**Class 10*

- “For the early years the Waldorf principle is in a class of its own and aids development in a playful and pressure-free way! Identifying with the class teacher was a good thing and created trust and a sense of community.” (under “positive”) “It was just too long! We needed qualified specialist teaching, which our teacher (from class 7) could no longer manage. By the end we were all very frustrated, and were hardly learning anything any more.” (under “negative”)
- *The time with the class teacher was much too long. Some subjects should have been taken over by other teachers much earlier on!!!*
- *“In all subjects the impression was that the teacher just didn’t know enough.”*

As is evident from these examples, the *desire for a shorter class teacher period* largely correlates with the class teacher’s *lack of competence* in particular subjects (e.g., physics, chemistry and languages), as perceived and experienced by the students. Some 109 students (26% of the whole sample) remarked upon a lack of competence in their class teacher, although at the same time they made allowances for the fact that no one could be expected to have specialised knowledge in so many subjects.

Connected to this and also widely mentioned are *minimal variation*, and the *inadequate (or even bad) preparation for the high school*. The preparation for the *transition to the high school* was often characterised as either too little or as badly done. It was described as too difficult, and other comments include: gaps in

knowledge had to be made up for, sometimes even basics were missing, in the primary school the learning requirements were too low, preparation for the pace of learning and the pressure in class 9 was inadequate, emphasis on the need to learn how to learn came much too late. 166 students (39%) made reference to the above-mentioned points in their comments.

Examples:

Class 10

- “You had the feeling of learning nothing, of mostly wasting time on speech exercises and stories/singing; you weren’t being properly prepared for the high school, in the dark about your own level of achievement.”
- “... from class 6 it would be better for the class teacher to be joined by specialist teachers...”
- “... in the final years of the class teacher period you really needs teachers with more specialised knowledge...”

Class 11

- The problem was that from classes 5 to 8 the material was too lame; especially in languages and science the stuff on offer was too “babyish”.
- “From class 5 on too few specialist teachers, too little academic pressure.”

Some students took a critical view of being *too used to/close to/ attached to the one teacher*. They thought that here and there this could lead to a lack of self-motivation and to dependency, resulting in students often having difficulties adjusting to the high school. The teacher is seen more in the role of guardian than of teacher. On the other hand, if he doesn’t take account of the fact that the students get older and more mature they are likely to feel that he is trying to control them too much and not treating them according to their age. This is why difficulties with teachers multiply at the time of puberty. The students are searching for a change of orientation, and feel too little support from the class teacher on this score.

Examples:

Class 9

- “The time was too tame. Teachers sometimes too nice (fatherly). Teachers often out of their depth.”
- “The class had no chance to get used to other teachers”.

Class 10

- “For me looking back the whole time with the class teacher was negative, because the contact with the teacher was just too intense, and subjects were taught that he didn’t really know all that much about. It seems to me a subject should not just be taught according to the formula “the teacher talks and the students listen.”
- “No variation. Every day exactly the same. Attachment to class teacher too close.”

Class 11

- “Through our class-teacher’s constant “mothering” some are very lacking in self-motivation.”

Class 12

- “lass teachers are always trying to steer you in the direction they think is right. You don’t have any free space of your own for making decisions. The class teacher time is too much about control.”
- “Through daily “contact” with the teacher too much “invasion” of private life, influence on free-time activities, e.g. film evenings, parties etc.; neglect of media (the reason: not good for the students ...).”

Class 13

- “too intimate a relationship between pupils and teachers.”
- “Through the almost family atmosphere it feels less like school and standards of achievement go down.”

Students’ suggestions for change

Many students are of the opinion that more properly qualified specialist teachers need to be brought in earlier as support for the class teacher. Generally speaking, they also feel it would be sensible to shorten the class teacher period.

The majority spoke of a sound and trusting relationship to the class teacher in the early years. The close bond to the class teacher, however, was occasionally cast in a critical light, the point being that too much care and closeness could diminish learning and foster dependency. The inadequate preparation for the high school also came in for strong comment. The focus here was on increasing academic demands, but appeals for more relevant choices of teaching topic were also made, for instance, subjects directly relating to young people and not just classical music, properly organised sex education, more integration of new media into lessons. There were also pleas for the possibility of opting out of certain subjects, e.g. eurythmy. One thing that seemed especially important for the students was that “learning how to learn” should be given higher priority. They also thought that in the higher classes students should be treated more according to their age (more individual study, more independence, less control, less of the “puberty is a problem” mentality). There should be some thought put into reforming “old” Waldorf principles and arriving at new ones more in tune with reality, and there should be more extensive use of textbooks.

Final comments on the questionnaire

These range from the fairly positive (“*I kind of like surveys*”) to the mildly critical (“*There’s not much point to this whole test; the last page is the only one that really makes sense.*”) One last comment: “*A report on the survey would be very interesting*”.

- “Have fun with the analysis!”
- “I don’t like things like this!”
- “I kind of like surveys”
- “Art is what you enjoy doing (Rudolf Steiner)”
- “there’s not much point to the whole test, the last page is the only one that really makes sense”
- “Good survey! What are you selling?”
- “Unfortunately I can’t remember everything 100%”
- “Start a campaign to have the class-teacher period shortened to 6 years! You should be allowed to choose your class guardian. Fantastic, what you are doing! Bring on the reforms!”
- “The questions in this test sound pretty weird, don’t really make sense”
- “Who’s going to interpret all this?”
- “The questionnaire is very one-sided!”
- “May the future Waldorf children experience a greater variety of teachers”
- “A report on the survey would be very interesting”.

6. Summary and discussion

Ideally the Waldorf class teacher principle could be one that constantly re-attunes itself in response to the changing demands, challenges and circumstances that it meets in practice. The living experience of the last 90 years, however, stands in sharp contrast to this. What we have is a tradition of practice nurtured on the assumption that the 8-year class teacher system was founded (by R. Steiner) on true principles of human nature and is therefore incontrovertible (e.g., Zdrzil, 2014). This exploratory study, initiated by the Regional Student Representative Council of the Waldorf Schools in Hessen (*Landsschülerrat*), attempts, by focusing on class 8, to address this assumption and throw some light upon current pedagogical practice. The hope was also that in the process it would identify indicators as to what has proved its worth and where the areas are that appear in need of change. All this has been done from the perspective of those at the receiving end of education, namely the students. This line of approach is important, since they are ultimately the ones for whom school is supposed to be a worthwhile experience.

The first thing that must be said is that the 8-year class teacher system came in for more approval than disapproval from the Waldorf students who participated in the survey. The features that caused the class teacher experience to be seen in retrospect as positive were: a good teacher-pupil relationship, involving a high degree of mutual trust; a teacher who meets the students' wishes and needs in an open and flexible way; and lessons that are interesting both in content and method. The class community, even beyond class 8, was also something of abiding importance for the students, for it gives them something they can rely on, a sense of trust, creates a sort of home base, and it enables the continuation of long-standing friendships among the students.

Looking more closely at the results, however, the opinions of the students go through many modifications, which call the 8-year system in its traditional form strongly into question. The main aspects are as follows:

- Right into class 8 the students spoke of being “over-protected” by their class teacher. They felt they were not being encouraged enough to become more mentally independent and self-motivated (e.g., in learning), neither was this expected of them nor supported. Many of the answers bore witness to the processes of disengagement from the formerly positive authority figure then occurring (viz: increasing questioning of the class teacher's role-model function). In view of the individualization tendencies going on within the students with the onset of puberty, this is understandable, and biographically important. The thing is, however, that these processes must be properly recognized and supported by the teachers, and in practice this evidently does not sufficiently succeed, in spite of the apparent persistence of a relatively good teacher-pupil relationship in class 8. Thus, the older the students become, the less the class teacher means to them. This situation can only be met insofar as the teacher relinquishes his role as leader and guide and instead sees himself more as mentor and facilitator.
- Since most Waldorf schools are single-streamed, the students are usually dependent on one central figure during the class teacher period, due to the lack of any alternatives. Failing or only partially managing to establish a good rapport with the class teacher is likely to lead to problems. This is a difficulty which – due to the acute shortage of teachers in Waldorf schools – is built into the whole system. Just how many students leave on account of such failed relationships is still unknown.
- By class 8 at the very latest the class teacher's ability to attend to the students' learning needs and to attain the requisite standards of achievement is no longer adequate – at least from the students' point of view. Furthermore, the transition to the high school is not well enough prepared, which is why if it works, it only does so in spite of serious student difficulties (main points: inability to cope with academic pressure, lack of direction from class 9 on). This can be addressed through appropriate pedagogical measures (for instance, communication with high school students, class visits, one-to-one conversations).
- The students also cast considerable doubt on the class-teacher's qualifications for teaching certain subjects – but at the same time this was excused by saying that no teacher could be expected to have

specialized knowledge and be fully competent and informed in so many subject areas. This, however, is no consolation for the many students who find that at the latest in class 9 they have many gaps in their knowledge, and that they have to make up not only for these, but also for their lack of some of the “basics”. Simply the high proportion of Waldorf students taking advantage of learning support is enough to show that here there is an urgent need for reform. It is therefore understandable that more than two thirds of those who participated in the survey wished they had been taught more often by specialist teachers in class 8.

- Neither the repertoire nor the understanding of methods that class teachers in Waldorf schools have at their disposal would seem to be broad enough. According to students, lessons – even in class 8 – tend all too often to be teacher-dominated, while opportunities for group work or forms of self-motivated study are fairly rare. This poses the question as to whether such an approach can ever reach all the students and give them what they need in terms of encouraging learning and ensuring high standards of achievement. When teaching consists mainly of: “The teacher talks, the students listen, answer his questions and copy from the blackboard”, what we have is a method which is no longer in tune with the findings of modern educational research. Added to this is the clear reluctance on the part of class teachers to integrate new media into the Waldorf classroom. Given this situation, it is understandable when students of class 8 feel that the lessons of their class teacher were old-fashioned.

As became clear in the students’ open answers, there are various reasons for opening a debate on the subject of shortening the class teacher period. Shortening it to six or seven years is very much in line with what can already be observed in more and more schools (e.g., Loebell, 2014). Ultimately such a discussion also provides an opportunity to deal with all the associated issues, such as the physical, psychological and temporal stress teachers are faced with. On account of these demands their duties place on them, the class teachers, in comparison to all other Waldorf teachers, are the group that feels most heavily under stress (cf. Randoll, 2013). That teachers’ experience of being thus overburdened can have a deleterious effect upon student performance has been empirically demonstrated in a recent study by Klusman and Richter (2014).

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