

## How the Waldorf Curriculum meets the needs of Young People

Michaël Merle

Good Morning everyone. Thank you for inviting me to come and speak to you. I was asked to come and speak to you about how the class 11, 12 and 13 curriculum meets the needs of the teenager in those years.

### Background:

Before I do that, some of you may not have been at Stellenbosch the last time I visited, so it may be advisable to give you a context. I teach at the Roseway Waldorf School. Briefly, Roseway started as a Junior primary school in 1985. At that stage, Roseway was the fifth Waldorf School in the country. The following year, we decided to pioneer class four, going up and pioneered a Kindergarten. The school grew up to class 7, and at that stage there was no intention to be more than a primary school. However, from our first class 7 group, people began to look towards a High School and the examples set by Constantia, Michael Oak, Max Stibbe and Michael Mount, the four established Waldorf Schools at the time. Eventually the high school was established in 1997. This first class 8 became the first class 13 in 2002. We have had 9 matric classes go through and are now in our 10<sup>th</sup> year of class 13. I first became involved with the school as a prospective parent, a parent and a board member. I became a member of staff in 2001. In some respects I know very much what it is like to be where you are because I once sat where you are sitting now, looking forward.

### Some Controversial Statements:

I will start off by making a few, very important and potentially controversial statements. The topic I was asked to speak on was how the class 11, 12 and 13 curriculum meets the needs of the teenager. I can tell you how the curriculum in class 11 and 12 meets the needs of the teenager, and I will suggest that class 13 does not have a curriculum! The next thing I would say is that, in essence, the class 11 and 12 curriculum meets the needs of the teenager. The class 13 syllabus, and I use that word very specifically, is intended to do something quite different. It isn't intended to meet the needs of the teenager, but it is of great value to teenagers and therefore has an important place in the structure.

I am speaking entirely from my experience at Roseway, so it will not be the same experience that you have here, necessarily, but hopefully what I say will give you indications of what you might want to look at. There is nothing that can replace experience. Your experience will be your experience, and our experience will be our experience. You can't, in truth learn that much from our experience, but it might give you indications of things that you can look out for. It can help you to consider. It can help you with your planning; to investigate and discuss certain areas. It can give you a reassurance that people have forged this path before and succeeded. I can talk about what worked and didn't work, but everything I say is based on a context that is not yours. You have to make it yours.

Back to the controversial statement: "In class 11 and 12 we have a curriculum and in class 13 we have a syllabus". At Roseway, we do the National Senior Certificate, writing the Department of

Education exams. Constantia Waldorf School does the same. Michael Mount, in Johannesburg, does not have a 13<sup>th</sup> year. They write the National Senior Certificate (the Independent Examination Board /IEB exams) in year 12. IEB exams follow the same syllabus and write exams of the same standard and to the same outcomes as the Department of Education exams. At Roseway, we do the Waldorf Curriculum in class 11 and 12 and do the matric syllabus in class 13.

### **What is a Curriculum? What is a Syllabus?**

I use the words syllabus and curriculum very deliberately because they are very different. The Afrikaans language also has two different words and I believe they are very useful because I think that they really open up the meanings very quickly. The Afrikaans word for a Curriculum is a “leergang” and the Afrikaans word for a syllabus is a “leerplan”. There is a difference. A “leerplan” is a learning plan, and that is a syllabus. You have a plan of what you want to learn. A “leergang” is a learning way. It’s different from having a learning plan, because curriculum implies methodology. It implies the way you are going to teach it.

The Federation of Waldorf Schools in South Africa put out a statement some years back, principally aimed at providing information for the National Department of Education, so that they would understand what we mean by a Waldorf Curriculum. It set out the principles or guidelines that inform the Waldorf Curriculum. One of the guidelines states that we in a Waldorf School do not teach content. We use content to teach children. That is said in order to explain that what we do is developmental work. The aim and intention of a Waldorf School is to provide the possibility for young people at any age to discover themselves and to develop themselves. Development does involve coming to terms with content. It does involve understanding work but that is not the principle aim of a Waldorf main lesson or even a Waldorf running lesson. The principle aim of a Waldorf main lesson is to help young people to find themselves: what are my limitations and my challenges? How am I forming my world view? How do I work with information? How do I access information? How do I analyse it? How do I synthesise it? How do I incorporate it so that I can express it, with confidence, so that it can reflect something about me? These are our aims. It is our experience that this Waldorf Curriculum, this thematic work that can be picked up and used to facilitate this process with young people, is extraordinary. It works because it really connects with stages of human development.

In a Waldorf School, we do not teach content. We use content to teach children.

It is very difficult to assess the main lesson in a Waldorf School, actually. It is possible to assess the content of a main lesson book, but the main lesson book only reflects one aspect of the main lesson. There is a wealth of assessment that I can make based on having been in the classroom and seen changes in the students, in their expression, of their understanding from one day to the next. There is also an element in what happens that I am unable to assess. I once heard a Waldorf teacher say that the only time you can assess a Waldorf lesson is at the end of a person’s life! There is an element that is beyond assessment. In truth, the only person who can honestly and comprehensively assess the outcome of a main lesson is the participant in the lesson. However,

they often do not have the tools to make the assessment in class 11 or 12. They might make the assessment many years later. It is significant that past pupils come back years later and say “I have never forgotten that experience in a main lesson.” It is not the content they remember, but the experience.

### **The importance of Experience:**

I will give you two examples of what I am trying to say, and I hope that you will excuse the clumsiness of the metaphors. Significant moments in our lives are remembered because we experienced them. Even if you read something and have an “Ah ha” moment as a consequence of reading, you are experiencing something. You remember what you have internalised from the reading years later. For example, if you get married, you have an experience. You don’t then write a test the next day on what that was like. Nobody then questions you. You aren’t asked: How many guests were at the wedding? Multiple choice: A 60, B 75, C 90? What exact words did the minister use in the third part of his sermon? Next question: how many carnations were in the bouquet on the main table? You don’t get asked those kinds of questions because none of those details are actually important. You could maybe be asked to describe your experience and that would be a better question, but how do we assess that? If you say, “The day overwhelmed me”, then that’s true, for you. If you say, “It was the best day of my life”, that’s also true. Your experience is true for you. So, if you are a wedding planner and go to a wedding to observe a wedding, in order to assist future couples to plan their wedding, then some of the details may be relevant. For example, the number of guests in relation to the size of the venue might be useful to assess. But that becomes a different exercise. The wedding planner is not experiencing the wedding. He or she is neither the bride nor groom. It is an event they are witnessing. In Waldorf education, the teaching is meant to be experiential, and not meant to be merely noticing and observing information.

This is how the Waldorf Curriculum meets the needs of teenagers. Because what we all need is an experience that will help us to come to an understanding that is our own.

In the same way, it would make no sense to me, in a Life Sciences lesson, in class 12, when one is looking at the animal kingdom, to dissect a frog. I am not saying that frog dissection does not have some value, but to come into a laboratory and dissect a frog tells you nothing about a frog, actually. You get to see the internal organs, but you have no idea of how a frog moves, the sound a frog makes; the environment in which a frog lives. To experience a frog, you have to leave the classroom and the laboratory, and go outside into nature. You have to allow nature to speak to you. That’s how you will know about a frog. Knowing about the internal organs won’t tell you much about a frog at all. It certainly won’t help you to identify a living frog when you saw one because they don’t lie there, open, belly up, sliced, with organs exposed.

So, Waldorf education is meant to allow young people to come to terms with what they observe and to allow the world to speak to them. This doesn’t mean that there isn’t a component of research and information, but the outcome will be that the information has to be analysed and very importantly in a Waldorf class 11, information has to be questioned. Almost every previous assumption has to be questioned. Waldorf education presumes that children are not going to simply

accept information because it is presented as fact. There is no such thing as a fact until you, yourself, have come to terms with it.

**An example: The class 11 Electromagnetism main lesson:**

For example, in the class 11 Electromagnetism main lesson, it would be very easy for me to explain that there was a time when the Ancient Greeks realised that if they polished amber and left it near some straw, the straw would move towards the amber. If I now tell the class why this is the case, I have killed the possibility of experience. It would be better for me to give out pieces of amber, and ask the students to polish them and not tell them why they are doing it (maybe tell them a story while they are polishing the amber). The students then place the amber near the straw and see what happens. They see it for themselves. They have an experience. Then, rather than tell them what is happening (and kill the possibility for real learning), ask them why they think the straw is attracted to the amber. Then take some pieces of amber that have not been polished and place them near the straw and see if there is a difference. Open up a discussion and help them to find the answers for themselves.

It is important to create a frustration in students. It is almost opposite to what you would expect, because if you have got a lot of content to cover, you can't afford to frustrate the students. In main lessons, we create a platform where the students understand that this is the content that they can rely on for now. It is important to develop and create an understanding that our perceptions and understandings evolve and change. If your world view has not shifted at all from when you were 20, then that is rather sad. Our life experience adds to and changes our world view. It changes how we see things. The black and white simplicity of our twenties is hopefully now shaded with many dimensions of grey (and a few splashes of blue and red and green!) so that you do see the world differently and this has informed your way of being. The same is true, and even more true, for a person going into grade 11 and grade 12. I would find it sad if at the end of grade 12, I encounter one of my pupils who speaks with the same mindset, using the same words that they used in the beginning of grade 11. We need to give them opportunity and scope to grow. They should be thinking almost completely differently by the end of grade 12. You want to see that dynamic development. That is what the grade 11 and 12 curriculum is really about.

**Class 11: "Heart Thinking"**

There are certain key main lessons in class 11 and 12 that I would like to mention. I think that all the main lessons are key but some really stand out because they define more clearly than others what class 11 is about. One of the key features of the class 11 curriculum is to meet young people's ideas that are forming into ideals. They have got certain ideas that are not theirs, let's be honest. There are ideas that live in the world and they are transforming them into ideals. As an adult we need to transform ideals into ideas, but they are taking the ideas that they have "borrowed" and turning them into their own ideals. There are some wonderful main lessons in class 11 that can really deal with that. There is a true waking up of thinking in class 11.

The Waldorf High School wakes up thinking.

We talk about willing, thinking and feeling. Primarily in kindergarten

we work with the will and the action of children. In the primary school we are developing feeling: not just shallow emotion but a real deep feeling; a sensitivity for content and for information that comes. In the high school we are waking up thinking. Not that there wasn't thinking in the kindergarten and primary school, of course there was, but these are vehicles for development. You can do that in class 8 and class 9 and class 10 but in class 11 and 12, the young teenagers have developed and grown. They have become other than what they were. As parents you will notice enormous physiological changes. You will see your children changing and transforming in front of your very eyes. It is not just an outer transformation; it is a picture of the inner transformation. It is a change in mindset and in looking at the world. Parents are often amazed at what their children say and understand. There is a sense of awe and wonder for parents. They are amazed by the transformation in their own child. They talk about the conceptualisation that is happening. It is almost the same awe and wonder that parents experience when their child takes his/her first steps. There is something truly miraculous unfolding, and so one works with that unfolding.

In a main lesson, one can cover an enormous amount of content, but you are not asking students to study and learn that content in order to write a test. We can test it at the end, and if they have remembered the content, it is not because they have sat and studied it; it is because they have lived it. They have had an experience of it. They have gone through a process.

#### **Content for exams can be managed:**

There is the possibility of teaching using a textbook. If it is well written, and the diagrams and illustrations support the text; if the words have been carefully chosen and the words have been clearly defined, and a teacher with good English comprehension skills has understood what they have read, it is possible, even for a person who is not trained in Geography, to read through a text and explain it to a class. If you have proficiency in the language, as an adult and you understand it, you can explain what is written on the page. It doesn't mean that you have any depth of experience or knowledge on the topic. A week later, you may not even remember what you have read. It doesn't mean that you didn't do a fairly good job of conveying the meaning of the words to the students. You can do that. It doesn't mean that the students can't then write a summary of the text, especially if they have the text in front of them, highlight key words and learn the skill of answering a question based on that content.

That assumes two things: first of all that content has to be quickly assimilated and secondly that questions are going to be at the level of the content in the textbook. So it won't ask you to explain something that wasn't explained in the text book or to take it any further or any deeper. So in truth, content knowledge for a grade 11 or 12 student has to be at a certain level. It can't possibly go too deep. There are two reasons for this: firstly, there isn't enough time. Also, they haven't formed all of the foundational concepts to be able to go any deeper into the subject. We are not dealing with someone with a doctorate in molecular physics, now after years and years of study. We expect students to simply grasp one model of the atom. Now, if you speak to a doctor of molecular physics, he or she will tell you that that is just a very simple model that we have long since abandoned, in truth, and that there are many intricate and complicated sub-atomic particles that are made up of sub-sub-atomic particles and so we go. But we have to start with something we can work with; something that is simple enough to comprehend and then we say, "Guess what? There is more to

it!” But we have to start somewhere that is manageable. It is like the analogy of taking your first step. Once a child has taken a step, nobody enters the child immediately into the Comrades Marathon. They have to take many steps first. In the same way, content at class 11, 12 or 13 level has to be at a standard that is manageable for young people. No examining body will set work that is beyond the possibility of the average student managing it. It is not set so that the students who are scoring “As” pass and everyone else fails, because that would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

So, I want to reassure that content can be covered, easily actually, and that it can be managed. There is a certain skill and exercise to it. At Roseway we do this kind of work only in class 13. We keep content driven work out of class 12. It is a model that has worked for us. It is successful. We don’t struggle in class 13 to cover the work and don’t have a requirement to manage it before that, so it works for us.

I would have a concern about content -driven courses run alongside developmental-driven courses only in so far as there is a possibility of (I am not saying it will happen, by the way, I am only warning of the potential danger) the one subsuming the other. You would really have to manage this consciously, clearly, plan it well, and have it well supported.

**Question from the audience:**

Does 13 go beyond class 12 level?

**Answer:** for us at Roseway, class 13 is matric. It is content driven, so it is the first time students will have chosen matric subjects. So, over the years we have offered 19 or 20 subjects. Next year’s class 12 are currently busy with their class 12 projects. They are in main lessons. Their last main lesson was Calculus. Next year, some of them have chosen to do Consumer Studies for matric. They have not done Consumer Studies before. The Subject Adviser for KZN knows that we don’t do Consumer Studies in Class 11 and 12, but she has seen our work in previous years and I have explained that our foundations of learning are in our experience they have before class 13. She thinks that we have covered the content in other subjects like Handwork, Art and so on. She has seen the work of the students at our school. She sees that our students manage well and she knows that most students that do consumer studies are usually not the top academic students. It has a 50% practical component to the course so it strikes one as the kind of subject that students who do not like essay-driven subjects choose to take. We are very proud of what our students achieve, but it is not what we are about.

Class 13 is about preparing students for tertiary work. It is a key to the door which is going to open up further studies. We try to forge a master key!

**Comment from the Audience:** “It is putting them back into the box so that they can go out”

**Reply:** “Yes, in a way. It is not a bad skill. It is a necessary skill.”

We spend time with the transition from class 12 to 13. The students are able to make distinctions. I say to the students: “We **were** doing developmental work, to “lead into the depths” (*Educare*), we have led you into the depths of yourselves, of the content, of the world, we have led you on an

exploratory route. We are not doing that now. Let's be clear: in class 13, we are not doing that. I am now schooling you to read content, summarise, answer questions, to write the matric exams at the end of the year. The pupils at Roseway might tell you that we cover the matric work creatively, quickly and intelligently. We summarise well. Those are all good skills, but when I teach matric, I am not a Waldorf teacher. I am dealing with Waldorf pupils and I adapt accordingly, but the methodology I use, even though it is informed by Waldorf methodology cannot be Waldorf methodology. For example, in matric, I can't run a Science experiment that is open-ended because the students have to write about the conclusion expected by the education department in the exam. For example, they can't suddenly argue contrary to Newton's Law of Physics, because this is not expected in the exams. We had a student at Roseway last year who thought Newton was completely wrong. He brought me texts and publications and we debated and discussed this and I kept saying "This is wonderful and exciting, but you know in the exam, Newton is right!"

That kind of openness is what Waldorf education is meant to be about. We are trying to develop in class 11 and class 12, creative, critical thinkers. Critical means that we can analyse, conclude, think, question and evaluate. We can bring an insight and draw on many disciplines and find that we can balance contradictory ideas about the same thing and not invalidate one completely. 16, 17, 18 and 19 year olds are quick to invalidate and they need to learn to look at the different sides of things. For example, even Einstein had concerns about Newton's laws, but there is validity to Newton in certain contexts and we are going to work with that this year.

Students are very flexible about moving from one mindset to another, if it is explained to them. We are working with two different vehicles: We have what we do that is true to the Waldorf curriculum and we have whatever we choose to do for school leaving certification. Now that was one of the biggest problems we had with presenting the Waldorf Curriculum to the Department of Education. They said it is not a curriculum, it's a philosophy. We had to say that there is a philosophy, behind it which says that we should reach the children at their stage of development, but we do also have a curriculum, with specific guidelines and themes. We do have content indications. For example in class 11, the theme of Electromagnetism is vast and you can't possibly teach everything. There is an economy in what we teach, which doesn't mean that we teach less, but that we can teach more without it necessarily taking a very long time. It is what you can do to support the experience without it becoming a burden to the students.

### **Other Key Areas in Class 11:**

One of the key areas in Class 11 is the **Parsival** main lesson. It has almost no academic base, in truth. It is an extraordinary story written in the early thirteenth century. It is an Arthurian legend. You might say, why use that story? Can't we find a more modern story? However, there are elements in this story that speak not just to a shift in consciousness at the time the story was written, but there are elements that have the opportunity to open up a reality for 16 and 17 year olds. It can break open questions for them. Most schools include an outing or camp with this experience. There is something essential in this story that can be worked with in class 11.

**The Social Outreach experience** in class 11 is also important. It is not just about work experience or what institution they go to that is importance but what they come to understand about themselves as a consequence of the experience. Can they internalise that and are they able to say something

about the world. It opens up questions for them about how we care and provide for people in society that need care and provision. How responsible are we for other people in society? How does society address these issues? How hidden are these institutions from view? What does it take to be a carer? They come back with a depth of understanding as a result of their experiences. They have to struggle with the answers.

In finding a balance between the exam driven work and the Waldorf curriculum, it is important not to lose what is vital to the Waldorf Curriculum. You have to still provide these opportunities. Young people can often manage much more than we expect them to. There is something to be said about engaging young people. The traditional academic work often doesn't engage them. The Waldorf Curriculum engages them very well.

The **Projective Geometry** main lesson in class 11 is also important. There is something about Projective Geometry that opens up a whole different way of thinking, not only about Geometry, but also about the world. There was a young man in matric last year. Half way through the Projective Geometry main lesson, he lit up from within. I said to him, "Please do philosophy at University." He really came alive.

After one Parsival main lesson, I thought that the main lesson was a complete failure. I saw one of the students a few years later, and he said, "I was at work the other day and I had an experience when I thought, this is exactly what Parsival must have felt!" I didn't think that he would even have remembered the story, let alone make any connections. It meant something to him. The story spoke to him seven years later!

There are elements in the class 11 curriculum that are essential. The English main lesson on **Romanticism** is an incredibly powerful main lesson. **The Aesthetics of Music** looks at the changes in human consciousness over the millennia, through the vehicle of music. These lessons have real impact. The class 11 curriculum looks at the romantic ideal of what the world can be. It speaks in a critical, creative way to that heart component to our thinking. It warms young people to what the world could be. Students have to "Love the times we live in." (Kim Payne, referring to a lecture by Rudolf Steiner).

Waldorf High School teachers  
must engage students in the  
"riddles of the world"

Rudolf Steiner

Steiner said that Waldorf High School teachers are obliged to engage children in the "riddles of the world." The world is full of riddles. Riddles are good things. You engage them in riddles. You don't give them the answers. They have to live with the riddle. The answers may change. The riddles stay the same, but our responses become flexible. It is not about having answers, but being able to live with the riddle and manage it.

At Roseway, we find that the students that manage themselves do the best. The students that manage the best are usually those that have been with us longer. Last year we had a student that had been with us only since class 11, and she was extremely nervous about matric. We had another student who had been with us since class 1, and he was very relaxed throughout the year. He is now doing mechanical engineering and was a straight "A" student in matric. He had a confidence in

his own sense of what it would take. The Waldorf Curriculum and how it approached the work stood him in good stead.

**Question from the audience:** Do these students go on to University and cope? When they are suddenly faced with the amount of work?

**Answer:** The student I have just described is doing Engineering now and coping well. We had a student in 2004, who went to UCT and did Anthropology as a major; she is a Rhodes Scholar and did her Masters at Oxford. She is now doing her doctorate at Stanford University in the USA. Her brother did Architecture. Her sister is now finishing Fine Arts at UCT. We have had other students who have done Economics, Accounting, Music, Architecture and Engineering. In our first year of matrics, one of our students studied molecular research. She has gone on to work in the sugar industry. Others have started their own businesses, but in terms of tertiary studies, we haven't had a student who has struggled with tertiary studies.

**Answer from Alison:** Feedback from University lecturers tells us that the Waldorf students do well because they are the ones who will come and ask questions. They are not afraid to tackle something new. Lecturers like students who are active and confident.

**Answer from Birgit:** We have had a letter from Stellenbosch University, saying that the Waldorf Students stand out (positively!)

**Question:**

Do your students only really learn to deal with the content in year 13?

**Answer:**

Yes. They do already know how to deal with content, as it turns out, but in year 13 we cover the work that would be covered in any matric year. That is the first time that we work with content only and this kind of testing. Our first matrics had not had exams at all before matric. They had no photocopied notes. We have a lecturer in classics from that class, an entrepreneur and the person who studied molecular physics.

**Comment from Konrad:** It sounds like the people you are describing achieved their full potential?

**Answer:** Yes, they are in the process of achieving their full potential.

**Question:**

How do the children who come into the school in class 10 or year 11 cope? Are they at a disadvantage?

**Answer:**

The students are not at a disadvantage academically, but some feel that they have "missed out" on some things. But they gain an enormous amount from the years that they do spend here. It is not uncommon to hear parents speak about a significant change, even in the first week of being at a Waldorf School. The way in which students see themselves, their class and their context changes. This can even be the case with students that come to us only for class 13. One young man came and

said that he had never before seen a class who were genuinely interested in learning! This interest in learning is an outcome of Waldorf Education.

**Answer from Rein:** Sometimes, when students join us later on, a process of “unlearning” has to happen, in some ways, but this can happen very quickly. They begin to enjoy school and enjoy the process and enjoy learning.

### **Class 12: Synthesis**

If class 11’s aim is to awaken “heart thinking”, class 12 is about synthesis: taking all the parts that they have learned about and seeing how they might come together. It is about drawing things together and finding a whole. A good example of that would be an English main lesson in which you look at a novel and how it is constructed. What techniques are used to successfully tell a story? How is a modern novel constructed and what does this say about the way in which we conceive of the world? How do you sustain a character and show development?

People at this age are developing a world view. They are about to launch into further studies and they are trying to see how things fit together.

I would like to share two other stories with you: There was one young man who had been at an International school, in another country, and joined us in class 5. His mother came 6 months later and told me that he had said, “Mom, we do so much more work here, but the other children in my class don’t know that. They think we are playing and having fun all the time! They don’t even know they are learning!”

We probably cover a lot more work than people would realise and we go into depths of discussion that are not common in many classrooms. The aim is not that they will know it all; but that they will have experienced something and that it has changed their thinking. One of the best skills that we can teach children today is how to analyse information. It takes nothing to “google” something. Information is freely available. Content is not the issue, but how do we work with the content that is available? How do we analyse it? How do we synthesise it? How do we know how to evaluate it? That comes out of experience.

There is something magical that comes out of a Waldorf Curriculum and it has nothing to do with the content. It comes out of conversation. And that is the human element of teacher and pupil and pupil and pupil. It is this interaction that makes every main lesson unique. I am hoping that young people will come to an understanding of Calculus, sure, but that’s not the point. I want them to struggle with concepts of integration in life and see calculations that reflect that. I want them to struggle with concepts of differentiation in life, and have that reflected in the experience of forever limiting a curve to a point. So the Maths speaks about something that has nothing to do with Mathematics, and their life experience can be found in a subject that is usually considered abstract and boring.

**We learn from our experiences!**