

After meeting a number of teachers, parents and children belonging to “Steiner Schools”, I visited 3 schools. The differences between these and other schools were immediately visible (classrooms painted wonderful colours) and audible (lots of music going on!) For information about the deeper differences I wrote to Rudolf Steiner House, 35 Park Road, London NW1 6XT and was put in touch with John Thomson who wrote the article below.

Special teacher training is essential for those who wish to teach in a Steiner School, to learn the teaching methods that arise out of Anthroposophy. Other differences between Steiner and mainstream schools are many: there are no fixed salaries for teachers, there is no Headmistress/master, responsibility for particular tasks such as finance or administration, is undertaken by individuals or groups within the school. For more information on Rudolf Steiner and Steiner Education write to the address above or read on below.

Teacher training for Steiner Schools

by *John Thomson*

Are teachers born or can they be made? This is a question that has perplexed me for a long time. Often I am sure that they are born, they carry innate the peculiar gifts, insights and qualities that make children want to learn from them. Or they don't. And then no amount of training can make up for the deficiencies. But a number of teachers have made me wonder. For I have seen apparently unpromising students turn eventually into successful teachers. (I have also seen apparently promising students become very unsuccessful teachers). So for me the teacher remains a mysterious creature. The mystery of the teacher is connected, of course, to the mystery of the task.



Growing-Up

When I first came across Steiner's views on education, I was immensely struck by the picture he gave of how the child develops. The physical changes that can be observed are outer expression of inner changes, and it is with these inner changes that our work is involved. Learning and, therefore, teaching before puberty are necessarily somewhat different from after puberty; also the kind of way the child learns before the change of teeth is markedly different from the process after. To a certain

extent this is obvious. In the kindergarten children play, and the 8 year old at school is engaged in more formal learning. But it is not just the difference which is important but the quality of the difference. The four year old is active without forethought, directly and immediately involved in doing things; moving, grasping, running, falling, standing and balancing characterize waking life at this stage. The child shares and participates in what happens around. He or she comes to imitate all kinds of activities and speech which are there in the environment. Imitation is one of the strongest features in early learning. Imitating is not copying. Only later do we see emerging the ability to copy in drawings, in movements. Then it is more an outwardly conscious process. Imitation is an unconscious process.

The 8 or 9 year old relates very differently to its world. The more awake intellect is concrete in its working. At the same time activity is still an important aspect of the learning process. In fact, doing is the usual springboard for understanding as in the younger years but now more consciously, more deliberately so. However, most important of all at this stage is the child's affective involvement in its learning. The child has to feel inwardly connected and bound up with the to and fro of learning. It has to feel a warm relation with its teacher. It has to feel lively interest in whatever it is asked to do. Dry and abstract learning is especially distasteful at this stage. Not just distasteful but even harmful. Story-telling is an effective means of teaching just because, if done imaginatively, it engages the interest, arouses feelings, and so a way is found to the content and the meaning.

The adult has a vital role to play as the bridge between the child and the world it longs to understand. Teachers best serve this role if their work is artistic. Art not only awakens the senses and engages the intellect but it also appeals to the feelings of the child.

Again 15 or 16 year olds have different needs, different motivation often and different aims in learning. Adolescents, of course, are preoccupied with themselves and with quite new outer horizons. They have not only reached a new intellectual threshold but also begin to grasp things with a new imaginative capacity. Education for this stage in a Waldorf School should still be spread over a broad spectrum of the Sciences and the Humanities, but also over practical work in crafts and arts as well as theoretical studies. It is in coming up against this wide range of experience that adolescents are helped to find themselves. And that is their particular need. Especially today. Adolescents have to be enabled to meet their own difficulties as well as their own successes. They often show themselves to be ferocious critics of the world they find themselves in and of the adults they have to deal with. This is not generally an unhealthy state. Rather it points to an aim of coming to a balanced understanding in different areas of experience. Making a piece of furniture, evaluating an historical situation, experiencing and working out social problems that arise, for example, in drama work – these all serve this aim of finding inner balance in judgement. Sound judgement is not best developed by giving undue emphasis to the critical faculty but rather by placing adolescents in learning situations where they have to find understanding for themselves.

An Approach to the Curriculum

I have tried to describe the different situation of the young person in relation to learning at different ages. Much more could be said about these differences because we are not just concerned in education with the cognitive or intellectual development but also with the affective and the volitional or motivational.

In a Waldorf School the aim is to shape the curriculum to this understanding of development. Broadly speaking, before the change of teeth i.e. up to about the 6th or 7th year, the little child is an imitator and what the adult offers for imitation can have the profoundest effect. A wide range of play activities, circle games, baking, singing, finger games, listening to and play-acting fairy tales, a healthy diet and a warm environment in the non-physical as well as the physical sense, contribute a sound basis for pre-school learning.

Again broadly speaking, the second stage from 6+ to 14 has the emphasis on what one might call educating the life of feeling, as at the third stage after puberty the aim could be described as educating the life of thinking. Of course this does not mean making children emotional. Many adults today experience a cramping inadequacy in their feelings. These are often disconnected from their thoughts and unrelated to their deeds. Is this sorry condition not to be attributed to education which tends to ignore or even trample on this area of experience? The life of thinking does not only include academic studies but also practical work in crafts such as weaving, forging, surveying etc.

I believe that such an approach can support the emergence of the special qualities that live in each individual.

Why Teach Foreign Languages?

From the beginning, Waldorf Schools have attached much importance to the teaching of foreign languages. Usually two are taught to all children at least up to puberty. After that, further studies may depend on the pupils' aptitude. In the UK the two languages are French and German. In Germany they may be French and English or Russian and English. Beginning the languages at the age of 6 means that for three years the pupil is working entirely with the spoken language. Stories, songs, poems, class-room situations involving the use of the language, small plays, provide the content. In this way a feeling for the rhythm and sounds of the language is acquired. In the 4th year the written language is worked with. Grammar also begins to be important but the teacher has to find ways to present this in a lively and interesting way. Hearing a foreign language in this direct manner with the emphasis on oral use has considerable educational value. The child takes in something of the essence of French or German language and culture. In its early formative years this can be an invigorating and truly educative experience. If language training begins later at 12 or 13, it tends only to deal with the cognitive aspects and only few students touch the real spirit of the language. Oral work also has a social quality which is lacking in the visual emphasis on the written word. I think the more feminine elements are cultivated through the spoken and auditory while the more masculine find their expression in the visual and written. The former emphasise the social, the latter the individualizing processes. We need both in education. (Of course I can use these terms to indicate qualities present in both girls and boys).

Educating the Teacher

What does this viewpoint mean for teacher training?

Let me list a number of elements which are important:

- a) Artistic education. This is important for all teachers. It is particularly important for class teachers who take a class of pupils for eight years from the age of 6 – 14. It is not unimportant either for upper school teachers in, for example, Mathematics or Physics where an artistic sense can greatly help the pedagogical method. Teachers whose main theme will be the teaching of an artistic subject like painting or music in the upper school require a full training in their art before taking up teacher training.
- b) An active understanding of child development i.e. not just a theoretical one but an imaginative conceptualization of growing up in body, soul and spirit, as well as a careful observation of the children one is educating. Observation has to be trained.
- c) A wide interest in contemporary life and culture.
- d) The teacher has to recognise the need for self-knowledge. This, of course, is an on-going process. It has to become a conscious one and not just rely on the knocks and blows that life may bring in any case. It means a readiness for self-education.
- e) Development of the teachers' skills. Lively and imaginative presentation of work. Awareness of rhythm in the lesson so that children are not bored or over-tired. An understanding of lesson structure. A sense for class order and discipline and how this relates to interest and the development of social feelings.

These are the most important elements in a teacher training programme. Of course the programme has to include a sufficient time in teaching practice for the student to get a feeling of how he or she relates to the children and to the task. This is the acid test.

Successful teaching means a strong commitment. In a Waldorf School the class teacher will have eight years with the same class as they grow from 6 to 14 years. This is, of course, an exceptional responsibility. Working closely with colleagues who can support and share experiences and insights is essential if this system is to succeed. The absence of a head teacher in a Waldorf School makes the sense of personal responsibility and of group collegiality absolutely vital. This poses the questions: How can schools be structured so

that the teacher has the right kind of freedom to develop his or her own unique style and method, and so that the maximum advantage can be derived from the collaboration of teachers? What kind of preparation does the teacher need in order to function in this way? I see these questions as especially important at this time of educational change.