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Choral Recitation

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"Why is there so much choral recitation in the Rudolf Steiner School?" parents often ask. "Isn't it rather monotonous? Is it good to sacrifice the individual nuances of a single voice in this way? What do the children gain from it? Isn't it a waste of valuable time in which they should be learning?"

The children should and do, of course, recite individually in the classroom. They all sharpen their tongues on tongue-twisters and fill out their voices and lungs on exercises that have sonorous, rolling vowels. But they need more than this. The ten-year-old boy who still speaks in the high tones of a six-year-old, who does not yet place his heel firmly on the ground and whose thoughts wander off into space, like his voice, needs some individual work. The teacher encourages him to speak with the decisiveness and strength of a king or a general. She tries to get his voice to follow the imperious, downward gesture of command or she may have him stamp his foot as he speaks, for speech tends to follow the line and direction of a physical gesture. She may give him alliterations based on the strong, gutteral sounds G and K to recite. As the boy works in this way over a period of time, you may gradually notice a new firmness and confidence begin to take hold of his whole nature. The girl who has a tendency to stutter needs harmonious, rhythmical verse to speak, for the rhythmical quality of her breathing is impaired. She needs, too, the kind of exercises that will help her to breathe out fully before she gasps too quickly for the next breath. The boy with the strident voice and the all-too-ready fists can be led to speak with a more relaxed fullness, to become sensitive to the modulations of his voice and the subtleties of the consonants spoken exactly and clearly in the foremost part of the mouth. Thus, through individual speech work the teacher becomes aware of the way in which each child is related to his speech organism, and the child's speech may be one avenue, and a very important one, for understanding, diagnosing his difficulties and helping his development. By guiding his speech, she is provided with one means of leading him to become more daring or gentler, less heavy and insensitive or more down-to-earth, as the case may be. She can help him to breathe more deeply and freely and to become more harmonious in himself and in relation to the world.

If the pupils spoke only in chorus, minor speech defects might pass unnoticed or would not be sufficiently remedied. However, almost every speech difficulty is benefited to no small degree by good choral speaking.

The day in the Rudolf Steiner School begins with speech exercises or poems recited in unison, for speaking awakens the one who speaks. Listening tends to make us sleepy. After concentrating on a long lesson, the class can be brought fresh and alive again by standing up and reciting a poem.

All this, however, is not so easy as it sounds. One boy yawns out loud and half collapses against his desk, a little girl fiddles with her neighbor's skirt. It takes experience, imagination and vitality to get the children to stand up straight and speak out with strength, clarity and enthusiasm. Once they come into the full swing of the recitation, color begins to rise in their cheeks and their eyes brighten. The teacher has attained her goal. Or, let us say, she has passed Scylla. Now she must beware her Charybdis; for once stimulated by this exciting element, the boys and girls-like wild horses-are apt to take the bits into their teeth and tear off into a chaos of galloping sound. To prevent disaster, the newly unleashed energy must immediately be guided into the exacting demands of sharply-formed consonants, of a particular phrasing of thought, of a deliberate change of rhythm. In concluding the

recitation the teacher must bring it over into a self-contained quiet so that the children sit down again not only awakened but self-possessed and concentrated.

The poems which they learn are usually chosen because they express a highlight or epitomize the mood or content of their main lesson work. The teacher speaks to the class, before presenting the poem, in such a way as to develop an understanding for its thoughts and to create an atmosphere out of which it is to be spoken. She, of course, knows it by heart and has already worked out most of the changes and phrasing implicit in its form before she speaks it for them. They learn it entirely by ear. Only the older children sometimes learn poems cold from the printed page. Each day the class works together on one or the other element in the poem. One day the rhythm is stressed, another day the dynamic motion of certain lines or the quality of the consonants that color a verse. Gradually the poem emerges into greater fullness, contrasts and clarity. When it is finally recited in an assembly the teacher, alas, is almost always disappointed. The children have been sitting quietly for a long time; they are anxious to "be good" and she misses something of the joy, vitality and spontaneity which rang out when they were alone together in the classroom.

Speech chorus is actually a highly economic means of teaching, for through it, in a short time, a teacher can refresh, enliven and train each child in a large group and bring to each one simultaneously a variety of valuable experiences.

The pictures in a poem fill a child's imagination; through them his sympathy for the world and his enthusiasm for beauty are awakened. His ear learns to follow the melody of the vowels and the sculpture of the consonants. He breathes deep with the wonderful surge, swing, skip and ripple of the rhythm. And these things he learns to appreciate not just with an aesthetic passivity but with active artistry. As the poem moves from enthusiasm to defeat, from bitterness to joy, his whole inward being becomes more agile, pliable and lively. The boys soon learn that this is no idle "playing around," but that often every bit of their strength is not enough to fulfill the demands of a powerful passage, and that they must be every bit as active and skillful as on the baseball field if they are to cut the consonants sharply enough and throw them home in just the right dramatic slice or curve.

They learn, too, that art is practice and has definite laws of clarity, rhythm, phrasing and gesture. They learn that the speaking of a poem is new each time and each time requires new effort and new awareness. So they become a little less apt to expect life to be "easy," to expect things to turn out "right" at the first try, a little less apt to despair when efforts fail and to become interested not only in the final result but in the processes of achievement as well. Like the violinist they learn the difficulty and delight of disciplined tempo change and of dramatic crescendo that mounts like a wave, mounts, waits, and then-just at the right moment-breaks with full decisive force.

As the children work over and over again to form the consonants exactly and livingly, they grow more alert. As they speak with fuller power and carry a long thought through on one long breath, the diaphragm grows stronger and the circulation stirs. Indeed good, vigorous recitation constitutes one of the best possible physical "breathing exercises," for it requires a natural deep breathing which strengthens the diaphragm muscles. When the children speak out fully in reciting a poem, not only do their lungs grow strong through exercise and fill with freshness, but the soul, too, "breathes," so to speak, expanding in wonder and courage, contracting in concentrated thought or earnestness; and the "in-spired", ideal element of the poem acts as a kind of inner oxygen that quickens their thoughts with life and eagerness.

In this way they learn a good many poems by heart and these become a part of themselves. Because of them they look at the world with new eyes, with new sympathy and appreciation. Poems learned early in life mean something to us in a way that no other poems quite can. They belong to us and rise up in us at odd or at critical moments to comfort or to help us see the world in its full color and subtlety.

It is true that a poem recited in chorus may often seem monotonous, but if you listen carefully you will be able to hear that the children are learning certain basic laws of phrasing, of projecting the voice and are gaining a sense of dramatic direction quickly and intelligently.

There is still another important aspect of choral speaking. Under cover of the sound of the many voices, the timid children forget themselves or summon up the courage to speak out as they never would otherwise; the leaders take pride in helping carry the weaker voices, but as soon as they become over-ambitious or show off, it becomes quite objectively obvious that they "stick out" and spoil the chorus. Each child depends upon and must adapt himself to the others, and this educates him to be an active, adaptable part of a social entity.

This is one of the times when a class is active as a whole. They all work together on shaping one and the same creation. They feel, at least at moments, the warmth, joy and thrill of this selfless companionship and are united by a common, ideal goal to which each one contributes his particular individual note. As a teacher works in this way with a group of children and experiences the concentrated, musical, sometimes lofty mood that is brought about in a classroom, she may well be reminded of how effective an instrument the ancient Greek chorus became in the days when the theater was a great educative force in the world.