

For life and for now – on the question of commitment and learning

Children want to learn

We do learn for life but also for this very moment. School should be a place full of immediate sense. For children the immediate moment is crucial, not a vague future. Children learn for their teachers. At first they are interested in people not in things. This interest should be protected. School and lessons are necessary because children cannot be left alone with learning. The encounter of the developing child with the world has to be mitigated, guided and sometimes actually arranged. Children, especially younger children enjoy being able to do something. They want to show what they are able to do. A little girl is protesting violently because the hurried mother buttons up the jacket, though she knows herself how to do that! And an even younger boy cries because he is not allowed to crawl into the car by himself. There are similar examples in great numbers. You want to show what you are able to do. It seems as if children enjoy being in the process of being tested. And if there is anything they are not able to do it is a reason for extra efforts. Fortunately there is no awareness of failing with achievements of this kind.

The brief claim that children learn on their own or not at all is often being observed and can therefore be confirmed.¹ If we are aware of that, the slogan "learn how to learn" sounds absurd, because learning is the thing children know better than many adults. The following question might be provocative and over the top: Do children forget how to learn in their early development, and do they have to relearn arduously at school? Children bring the preconditions of learning with them. The question is, what can be developed out of that at school? It is true that many children bring problems with them to school and may have forgotten to learn how to learn. There is a reference to a decrease in the number of questions asked by children when they have entered school. Does school give too many answers to question that are not asked?²

Commitment through interest

Rudolf Steiner's comments on homework are very remarkable in this context. As a rule homework is considered as necessary and there is no question about it. According to R. Steiner it should be done voluntarily and is not compulsory.³ It is the child's own activity which should be encouraged. "Encouragement can be given to do this or that at home, but not in a way of demanding it, there should-

1 see John Holt, *Kinder lernen selbständig oder gar nicht(s)*, Beltz Verlag 1999

2 Erika Dühnfort, *Der Sprachbau als Kunstwerk*, Freies Geistesleben 1997

3 R. Steiner, GA 300 a-c, conference of 1.1.1920

n't be any pressure."⁴ Lessons should be arranged in a way that "we don't need anything in addition to the school lesson"⁵ Learning has nothing to do with pressure from outside. But how can we create commitment. Aren't stimulations from outside necessary? Indeed! But what counts as an impetus or encouragement?⁶ Rudolf Steiner says there is a connection between the ability to fulfil one's duty and childish curiosity.

He answered a question on the sense of duty of class 7 pupils: It should be aimed at making children curious with their tasks. If you ask questions in a way that makes children curious on what they find out, it will be stimulating."⁷ Commitment without interest is unthinkable. The point is not any performance of duty but the ability to commit oneself. The moral law has to be found in one's own soul. This happens through an interest in the world. Apart from homework there is also schoolwork. Children can bring everything possible from home to school, even if it is home-made jam or an interesting book somebody is reading at present. If we imply and sometimes demand in a reproachful manner that parents help with school aims, teachers should as a matter of fact be interested in domestic life of the children. There is a bridge between school and home which can be crossed from two directions.

Images and allegories can be stimulating, too. Each image implies that nothing exists only for itself in the world. Everything exceeds itself if it ought to have a meaning. Images ought to develop a sense for overall connections. Images should not convey associations, but they are symbols for "congealed understanding". Some examples from Rudolf Steiner are provocative: "Children have understood that the octopus is a weeping human being, the mouse an alert eye." Children should get strong and impressive images which engrave themselves into their minds."⁸ This means the teacher is bound to develop an inner relationship to images and allegories. The many times given image of the pupa and the butterfly is only effective if the teacher is imbued with the idea of an immortal soul. Being imbued with something applies to all images. An exciting story can also be told without conviction. What would be the difference? Children and adolescents have got a fine feeling for nuances. Being interested outwardly doesn't mean that the inner soul is actually touched. This manifests itself in many ways. Many disturbances of the lesson might arise from a deep disappointment of the children that teachers are so detached from life and questions of under-

4 *ibid.* conference of 11.09.1921

5 *ibid.*

6 Adults should show children something of the world. This is the thesis of a book which is readable for long stretches, by Donata Elschenbroich: "Weltwissen des Siebenjährigen", Kösel Verlag 2001

7 R. Steiner, GA 300 a-c, conference of 28.04.1922. Opposing essay topics which are dealt with one after another are according to Steiner, very stimulating: "The steam engine, a witness of human power" and "The steam engine, a witness of human weakness"

8 *ibid.*

standing. This is actually a question of meditative examination of oneself and an overall examination of the curriculum. Children always feel committed to their sense of truth. For the teacher commitment stands for a spiritual way of exercising.

Falling and rising aspects in learning

The centre of the lesson is the quest for the being of the child, that we are accompanying on its way of incarnation into the world. But that doesn't mean to ignore everyday life. Especially great ideas should be suitable for everyday life. It is actually a precondition for the teacher to know how to materialize great ideas, and to be able to realize them in the most common affairs. An example: parents had withdrawn their child from school. It had been attending a state school for a short time. A further conversation took place and the parents gave an example how they had experienced learning: in grade 3 at a Waldorf School children learn to read the clock. Everyone fidgets a bit with a selfmade cardboard clock, later it is drawn into the exercise book. Children have to finish the picture at home. In state school it is different, according to the parents. Children learn in 25 exercises and variations settings of the clock and begin to work it out. Maybe this example is correct and as well incorrect for most individual cases. There is a lot of exercising in Waldorf School lessons, too. But questions are arising: For Waldorf Schools pedagogy is mainly the art of education. Does that mean that we can't say what children have learnt in many fields, only what they have experienced in some way? In an artistic imaginative and narrative lesson learning objectives can't simply be called up and tested at the end of the lesson. We do let the children recall the next day what had been told but is this the main thing? What was taken in during a lesson is not meant to remain on the surface and to be tested but should reach deeper layers. Children also get to know something about the human incarnation by many images while having their first main lessons in history. The actual topic of the man and animal main lesson is the human being. And when I tell children in 3rd grade how fire moved into the houses it is actually the movement of the I into the body. Learning is a special kind of nourishment. Lessons ought to nourish the children's and young people's soul. However it is not sufficient to be able to tell what has been fed or taken in. True nourishment takes place in deeper regions than in mere consciousness.

Learning is the metamorphosis of our worldly surrounding into human abilities. There are various steps to take during this process. First there is a falling process. There is always something falling asleep. Otherwise there were no real skills and learning had no significance for the curriculum. But that is not everything. Each lesson is some sort of a balancing act. Education as an art means to handle polarities. On the one hand it is learning which might only be useful at a future age. On the other hand it also concerns the immediate present. To say it

with Janucz Korzcak: Children have a right of the immediate moment.⁹ Each lesson is unique, that's what makes it precious. Each awakening takes us back to the present. The point is spiritual awareness, actually to be contemporary. That is why lessons also have a rising character. Each subject is full of elements one should be aware of. Language lessons can't do without active and disposable vocabulary and in a history lesson it may be useful to fix certain events in their context with dates which have to be learnt by heart. Without such an awareness it wouldn't be possible to calculate and in the craft main lesson children should be able to name the different tools of a mason. Teaching doesn't make sense if children don't recognize the things at home they have talked about at school. But this is only possible if children are enabled to experience actively and with all their senses. It is not sufficient for example to draw a certain form it should also be drawn into the air and be experienced by walking. Will and feeling are to be united actively with the world. Here seems to be a traditional place for exams of all kind but more in the sense of "showing" from the part of the children. For children it is crucial that their performances are noticed and acknowledged by adults.

Exams – why?

There are many "exams" in everyday life. We ask children a lot of questions, make them come to the blackboard, have them write dictations and class tests. New pupils have a probationary period and some are sent to a farm for some time for a more inner stock-taking. However pupils themselves want to know "where they are" and demand clear answers. They take a close look at what the teacher has written underneath the test, compare it with others and complain if they feel misjudged. Exams of this kind are part of a pedagogical process. They have nothing in common with authorizations, with yes or no, with passing or failing. If there is a consistent exercising and learning, if teachers know their pupils well, then there is no reason for extra tests pupils have to cram for. Learning and examining are two aspects of the same thing which takes place when there is some self-assessment in learning. Pupils of middle school could be prompted to think of some interesting questions about which they want to write in a class test. Pupils' questions are compared to the teacher's, and maybe they are the same.

It is a justified question: Can anybody be authorized to judge children or adolescents, whether they have passed or not? It would be different if exams themselves were normal assignments. I can only be examined by myself and exams are only human if they allow self-assessment.¹⁰

⁹ J. Korzcak was contrary to the ideas of that time; he was of the opinion that children are already and not only becoming human beings. Teachers are only responsible for the today. In his "Magna Charta Libertatis" he formulated 3 basic rights: The right of the child to its death, the right to today and the right to be itself.

¹⁰ Find an example in the article by Robert Thomas

Examinations appropriate to human beings

There is nearly no situation in life where we are not in the process of being tested. We have got a more or less well developed feel for the right thing, otherwise we couldn't recognize any differences. It is one of the central pedagogical tasks of moral education to help children with their development of this feel. If a 14 years old boy says that he has got the feeling that somebody is still watching him when he is doing something, it relates to the field mentioned. Exams of this kind, and even if it's only a slight feeling of being watched, are always appropriate to the human being. The development of a personal conscience is part of an individual development and therefore also part of human development. Some sort of archetype becomes apparent.: On a spiritual path the inner voice can be extended until an inner threshold is being reached. Rudolf Steiner describes this way which leads to the guardian in various ways: In one image he talks about a green liquid in a glass. The two colours have separated. On top is the blue colour; the yellow one has settled to the bottom of the glass. At this level the actual path of exercises begins. The purified forces of the soul have separated from the remaining human being who starts to lead a life on its own and becomes the Double. The task is to reform the independent lower human being. Managing the sight of this lower human being has to be learned. The actual task is a productive handling of this lower human being. This is in short a description of the examination which takes place in the most various ways in each biography. Even if this concerns only lives of adults there are certain tasks arising regarding education. Something of the described image rises up into the relationship between teacher and pupil. Which threshold have teachers to guard? This comparison makes one a bit dizzy. It only makes sense if we see a major task in doing anything possible to help the pupil to develop own stages of examination with the question of a possible relationship to the own higher I.

Night exams

What does that mean for the lower and middle grades of a Waldorf School? Each child is known with its strengths and weaknesses, why should their performances be tested in particular? Tests are not in demand. In the sense of a three-fold step¹¹ the things which have been learned should be grasped. Grasping can take place in different ways and is meant to unite what has been learned with the spiritual life of the child. The point is not an understanding. A sort of "handing over" to the spiritual world takes place at night. This is the only and true way of learning. Forgetting during the night helps to transform into abilities what has been learned before.

Besides the everyday exams some exams take place at night. Maybe these ex-

¹¹ See: R. Steiner, GA 302, *Menschenkenntnis und Unterrichtsgestaltung*. R. Steiner here talks about an adaptation of learning to the threefold human being.

periences are far deeper and more lasting because they are much deeper engraved in the child's life story. During the encounter with the higher I the useless is sorted out. Not all experiences are suited to become abilities. Mere definitions are discriminated from flexible concepts which can be involved in life and growth processes. The answer to the nightly experiences following the lessons of the day is part of what the children bring with them to school the next day. Certainly it is not always easy to understand these answers.

Tasks for the teacher

Even if children and adolescents who are "born later" are closer to the spiritual world, things aren't always easy to manage, methodological skills are necessary. "Methodeia" stems from ways of doing something but it also means tricks and deception. Do we trick children into learning by having many funny ideas to keep them happy? That would be a misunderstanding. A good idea for a lesson is not a trick.¹² Lasting commitment in learning is created otherwise. Many things do not work the way we would like them to because they have not been thought through in our preparations. But even if we have thought of everything the course of a lesson might be different to what we had planned. Children always take a part in teaching. Presence of mind is essential. But how can presence of mind be planned? This is the wrong question. It is the question of a mind in the present. That means if I do a certain thing I do not think of another. In terms of our preparations it means that the purpose is not the lesson of tomorrow in the first place, preparations are meaningful when in progress. Thinking of the future might distract from the immediate moment to which we should be committed. Commitment is only possible in this very moment and not in the future. Preparation means producing ability before the act. An intense preoccupation with the lesson contents makes the lesson itself less important. This is the precondition of being creative the next day. The teacher, too has to take a three-fold step.

A structural change can be observed at state schools. The role of the teacher has changed. The teacher as the centre of attention has become suspect. If he does too much on his own he will hinder the independence of the individual child. The former tutelage ought to change into an inspiring, supporting and at the same time demanding companionship regarding all learning processes. This means anything but withdrawing from the tasks of teaching. Concerning Waldorf pedagogy we have to differentiate between chalk and talk and a teacher centred lesson. Impulses and stimulus on development which come from the teacher have nothing to do with giving lectures. Lessons which can be related to a series of lectures are a poor basis for developing images and allegories, and children will not be able to really grasp them.

¹² Of course there are situations in class where we are happy to fall back on some ideas which work and will save the lesson.

In Waldorf education the teacher is always a narrator. Images refer not only to stories but to the lessons as a whole. Telling stories about the electric light bulb or the cylinder of a steam engine can be exciting. Images of this kind may be difficult to convey in individualised ways of teaching. Individualised ways of teaching like pair-work or team-work are useful in different situations. This is not a question of organization but of designing relationship.

Methodology is not only a teacher's affair. The children are supposed to learn. Methodology has to change into ways of learning for the pupils. Seen in this way, we always hand over the lesson to the children and young people. A central figure is still the class teacher at the Waldorf School. He/she teaches the main lesson. Do other subjects therefore become irrelevant? If we think of authority we might think of the class teacher. He or she is most of the time with the class and teaches early in the morning when children are at their peak of attention. Every subject teacher who teaches for instance a foreign language in a 6th lesson is able to tell a thing or two about that. What can we do to create an atmosphere of work even if the class teacher is not present? Does a wrong understanding and practice of authority hinder individual learning and should authority involve less telling but more listening? In Montessori pedagogy the teacher who perceives and listens is of great significance. The image of a class teacher at a Waldorf School is that of a doer, not an observer and perceiver. If that is a fact we should widen our idea of authority. Maybe true authority is the ability to withdraw at the right moment. It is not only the teacher who should learn the art of education. If the aim is to make learning an affair of children and young people then this work of art is an affair of all people involved.

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