

Audrey McAllen's 'The Extra Lesson'¹

Joep Eikenboom

Audrey McAllen, a veteran English Waldorf teacher, first published her research findings in the original printing of *The Extra Lesson* close to 50 years ago. Through extensive observation of mostly middle school children, she experimented with Rudolf Steiner's explanations of the inner workings of the human being and earth currents found in Steiner's 1909 collection of lectures, *Body, Soul and Spirit*. Interest in her work spread and she continued to consult with professionals in the pedagogical and developmental fields resulting in other, broader editions of the book. *Extra Lesson* is now taught worldwide.

The Origin and Source

Years before the first Waldorf School was founded, Rudolf Steiner unfolded his views and insights on the education of the child. The first stage of development takes place on a bodily level. The child learns by moving, playing and using the total system of the senses. The nerve cells are fully developed at birth, but there is a limited number of connections between them. During the first years the brain and nervous system are further developed while the child explores the environment and the senses and movement system matures.

The sense of touch gives the child an inner image of the physical space that she occupies, the sense of life supports the general rhythm of life and brings an awareness of the general, organic or constitutional condition of the child's body. Essential for the coordination of movement are the senses of balance and self-movement. The foundation for learning is laid by the development of these four basic senses; it consists of the capacity for spatial orientation and one's own body awareness—body geography.

Modern science has confirmed the importance of sensory-motor development. The senses for balance and movement play an important role in visual and auditory processing, which are essential for learning, and support the ability to focus and concentrate. When, in the early 1940s, Audrey McAllen trained to become a Waldorf teacher, Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical lectures 'The Foundations of Human Experience' were not yet translated into English. At the time, her instructor, Elly Wilke, held a series of lectures about

'The Understanding of Human Beings', a subject that covered the anthroposophical insights in the human body, soul and spirit. Miss Wilke's teaching was based on Rudolf Steiner's lectures, given in Berlin between 1909 and 1911, now published in *Wisdom of Man, of the Soul, and of the Spirit* (GA 115). In the first section (four lectures held in 1909), Steiner speaks about the senses and the human physical body built up by flowing super-sensible currents. Later, when Audrey McAllen was asked to work with children with learning difficulties, these same lectures became the inspiring source out of which she developed the Extra Lesson.

Archetypal Steps in the Child's Development

The exercises given in the book *The Extra Lesson*, as well as new exercises developed according to these concepts, help the incarnating individuality of the child to connect with the universal architecture of the human body and of planet earth. As Audrey McAllen puts it: "The Extra Lesson Concept doesn't focus on the soul of the child, but it works with the spiritual laws behind the architecture of the physical human body, and with the spirit of the earth. The exercises integrate the movements of the child into the universal movement patterns of the earth."

Thus, the Extra Lesson directly addresses the evolutionary aspects of the human being and the earth during earlier developmental stages which, according to Steiner, are mirrored in the first seven years of the child's development.

General Pedagogy and Medical Therapies

In the case of the child with a specific pedagogical problem, such as an extreme temperament, an enhanced constitutional type, or a psychological or moral issue, one is concerned with the Ego, which, in the Earth period, has been sucked into the astral body and into the personal problems that the individual soul is struggling with in this incarnation.

The Extra Lesson offers pedagogical exercises in movement, form drawing, and painting, which prepare the road towards the learning process in writing, reading and mathematics. Steiner's indications on the

¹ This article first appeared on the *Online Waldorf Library* website in December 2014.

development of the human sense organism, and the total mirroring sequence in the sensory processing, i.e., what happens in the super-sensible members of the human being, are the other essential components of the Extra Lesson.

The exercises are built upon the archetypal human movement possibilities, gestures that are also found in household activities, hand and craft work, folk dances, etc. These movements correspond with the movements of the earth in relation to the sun, moon, and planets of the solar system, as well as the movements in the currents of the oceans and rivers, and in the currents in the air and weather systems of our planet. By offering the child these archetypal movement patterns, the child is helped to prepare her body to become a proper vessel for her individuality.

Because Extra Lesson is developed on the principles of Waldorf pedagogy, breathing and sleeping-waking rhythms are further essential components.

Qualities of Extra Lesson Exercises

Extra Lesson exercises have an archetypal character. Therefore, they can be used for all children and are not just for a specific teacher with a specific child, nor do they address specific temperaments.

The exercises are developed according to archetypal laws of neurological and movement development of the first seven years or are actual steps in this neurological development. This neurological and movement development produces capacities needed for learning skills, such as writing, reading or jumping rope. The movements of these exercises are connected to the movement patterns in the human being and the earth as indicated by Rudolf Steiner in the 1909 lectures 'Anthroposophy'.²

In these exercises, we find a rhythm between "stretching" and "lifting" movements, between tension and relaxation. They help to integrate the postural system, particularly the senses of balance and self-movement. By means of this rhythmical element, and by repeating the exercises for several weeks or months, the movements start to penetrate and activate the life forces or etheric body of the child, which is the carrier of habit patterns. The etheric body will become enlivened, the child will look healthier. These exercises

are not purely physical training or patterning. The rhythmical repetition often requires the teacher's pedagogical support to motivate the child.

Rudolf Steiner indicated in the aforementioned lectures that, in the sense of self movement, the astral body moves in the opposite direction to the movements of the physical body. The movements through which the astral body is activated contain the archetypal patterns of the spiral or of the lemniscate. Through these, the exercises become dynamic and rhythmical. Other archetypal elements that are used are: the straight line, point and circle, which are a picture of the Ego organization. The six-pointed

and five-pointed stars are archetypal pictures of man incarnating.

The astral body can connect properly with the physical and etheric body through rhythmical repetition of the exercises. Often, the day-wake consciousness becomes a little diminished, but the sleeping will—the subconscious—is activated. The child thus incarnates better into her body. Sometimes only then personality or constitutional problems of the astral body (the lower and not the objective astral body) appear.

The Ego is called upon by the lifting element in the movement patterns. The eyes need to follow the movements of the limbs if possible, and the feet need to be kept parallel. In the rhythmical movements there needs to be a pause. In the pause, the astral body can come to rest and the ego can imprint the movement pattern into the etheric and physical body. The exercises have an indication of the minimum age of the child doing the exercise.

Educational Support Lessons

An Educational Support teacher, working one-to-one, can compose lessons with movement exercises for spatial orientation, body geography, lifting and stretching, rhythm and breathing, speech, form drawing, and some academic work. Most find that a schedule of twice weekly meetings has an effect. It is advisable to end each lesson with a short painting exercise, in order to work the forces that were called upon by the movement exercises to penetrate into the organism of the child—as Rudolf Steiner has indicated for ending eurythmy and gymnastics lessons.

² Published as *A Psychology of Body, Soul and Spirit: Anthroposophy, Psychosophy, and Pneumatosophy* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1999).

Key Exercises

It is advisable to have all students recapitulate the movement development from two-dimensional into three-dimensional space, i.e., from the horizontal to standing up and walking upright.

A sequence of crawling exercises helps to integrate early movement patterns. Although it will not always show from the beginning, very often improper integrated early movement patterns are hidden deep in the movement system of the child, and are interfering with the functioning of the sense and movement organization.

Breathing is the healing element in education. A unique exercise for healthy breathing is the *Copper Ball* exercise, always followed by the *Moving Straight Line and Lemniscate* form drawing exercise. Both exercises are designed according to universal developmental steps.

The *Moving Straight Line and Lemniscate* form drawing exercise addresses the activity of the left and right sides of the body, the conscious coordination and the rhythmical movement and breathing. The lemniscate and straight line are archetypal forms that address the super-sensible organization of the child.

Another unique exercise is the *Right-Angled Triangle*, which addresses the total movement system, including legs, arms, eye muscles and movement coordination. This exercise also connects the super-sensible forces of the bodily organization of the child with the spiritual forces that have built up his body and the planet earth. In this exercise, breathing activity is also strongly involved, including the rhythmic flow of the cerebrospinal fluid. Thus, the conscious will of the child is activated.

The painting activities in Extra Lesson all have an archetypal character. Therefore, form and color indications might seem limited. Developing creativity is not the primary goal here.

Classroom

Class teachers can also use the Extra Lesson exercises in their teaching, either for individual children or with the whole class. The latter needs to be well organized because one wants all the children to do the exercises correctly. The teacher should be able to demonstrate the exercises properly because the children's forces of imitation are involved. To observe the children's

movement development one can have them perform the exercises in small groups.

The effect of this might be different from a one-to-one approach, since this works more as a hygienic intervention than in a pedagogical-therapeutic sense. However, doing these specific and focused exercises with a whole class and taking turns in smaller individual groups is highly recommended. Class teachers should be aware of the fact that the foundation for learning lies in the physical development of the first seven years. Extra Lesson exercises are successfully done in Waldorf schools in blocks of various lengths.

Individual soul requirements and constitutional issues are the province of the class teacher and/or school medical doctor, and these should be addressed by them and/or by curative (therapeutic) eurythmy or art therapy.

Extra Lesson is a valuable solution to learning difficulties, and, as described above, its methods come directly out of classroom pedagogy and general anthroposophy. Extra Lesson stands within the pedagogy for the normal child. It is an important aid to child study. It can be supported by gymnastics, artistic therapy, curative eurythmy, the doctor's interventions—as the class teacher responsible for the child sees they are required, or as suggested to them by the Extra Lesson teacher.

Extra Lesson activities can be part of the classroom routine. One must keep in mind that working with Extra Lesson is a pedagogical approach of a teacher. The goal is to support the children in their learning process. Reintroduction to formal work in writing, reading, and arithmetic is part of the concept.

Joep Eikenboom has been a Waldorf teacher in primary schools since 1980. In the early 1980s he met Audrey McAllen and started to work with her ideas. Between 1987 and 1990 he worked as an educational support teacher. He studied the anthroposophical background of Audrey McAllen's work in close contact with her. He is now a class teacher at a Waldorf school in the Netherlands and one of his goals is to bring the Extra Lesson into the classroom. In his book, *Foundations of the Extra Lesson*, he shares the spiritual and pedagogical background of the Extra Lesson concepts.

Further Reading

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