



Education for our Times

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Education is a major issue in today's world. Though the problems appeared first in Western countries, the questions being asked are now almost universal: Why is it so hard for children to listen, particularly boys? Why do many drop out of school? Why is the rate of adolescent suicides and drug taking so high? What is the cause of violence in school children? Are educational standards actually lower than they were in previous generations?

We could sum up all these questions in a single one: Is education meeting the real needs of our times?

To attempt to answer we need to look in two directions - outwardly towards what the world is requiring of young people, and inwardly towards the question of children's development. The two are inter-related.

From the outside come the familiar demands of modern industrial societies - for academic excellence, skills that will be useful in the work force, basic social ethics and so forth. Any contemporary educational method must respond to these, though there are very different ways of doing so. This is fundamental, but it is not enough.

For all our technological accomplishment, we face very great problems in the world today. Starvation, wars, violence and depression are world phenomena, while the incidence of new illnesses, such as AIDS, which still elude a cure, is growing. Behind the veneer of material well-being in many industrial nations we are witnessing a dying nature and an alarming level of psychological and social disorder. There also seem to be more learning difficulties amongst children than ever before.

The list could go on, as we all know. Conventional attitudes lack the force to grapple with these world-wide problems. Turn on the news once a month and one hears the same scenarios being played out in different guises. It is like a tape that has got stuck. What cries out at us is the need, for the sake of the world, to develop new levels of our humanity, new faculties of thinking, feeling and perceiving.

More than ever before there is the need, coming from within and without, to find a new relationship with nature and the spirit, not through trance or sentimentality but as a further development of our modern consciousness and individuality. Without it our contemporary struggles will remain incomprehensible and insoluble.

Scientific theory – in quantum physics, for example – has already crossed beyond the boundaries of mechanistic thinking, yet the explanations in high school textbooks are as materialistic as ever. Likewise within our own lives questions and experiences can well up seemingly from nowhere with shattering intensity, but without a recognized science of the spirit we lack the tools to make sense of it. So often we cannot even share what is happening inside us for fear of ridicule. All of these are symptoms of a world-wide change, so easily overlooked. They are the birth pangs of a new stage of human development.

We find then, when we look at education in the light of this bigger picture of what is happening, that our traditional assumptions are in question. After all, there has never been a time when we have had such a capacity for cleverness and such a fund of information at our fingertips, yet this does not seem to have helped us either to understand each other or find meaning (let alone peace) in our lives.

Academic achievement is of very great importance, but it is not enough. Out of balance, it is even destructive. It must be complemented by other human faculties, such as ethical responsibility, social sensitivity, courage, discernment and ultimately love, which are far more difficult to educate. Most of all we are called upon, as modern people, to develop a new capacity of thinking which is at the same time moral and practical, creative and logical, reliable and yet open to higher inspiration.

For this to become possible we must first substantially broaden and deepen our concept of what education is. We have to learn to educate the whole human being. This is the task which people involved in Rudolf Steiner education have been pioneering throughout the world for nearly a century. It is a continuing endeavour but more and more it is being recognized in its true validity today, even though it is still but a drop in an ocean.

What does it mean to educate the whole child? We can only find answers by looking at children themselves.

Preschool and Kindergarten

Little children are much closer to the spiritual world than we are as adults. They are bathed in it, illumined by it. Countless mothers and fathers know this intuitively but because they lack any concept of the spiritual world, take no notice of it. Strange as it may sound, we only perceive what we have concepts for.

The poet William Wordsworth in his 'Intimations of Immortality' has left us with a vivid image of birth:

*Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.*

This aura of Grace which hovers over a young child and the warmth of innocence which surrounds her are gradually shed as she grows. So it has to be, for childhood development is a bumpy road toward consciousness and becoming conscious means standing alone, separate, free... But all in good time; accelerating the process can only be destructive.

As adults we naturally distinguish clearly between ourselves and the outside world. We see the two as being quite separate. For the pre-school and kindergarten child there is as yet very little consciousness of self as something distinct and different. Certainly there are needs and there are squabbles, because such-and-such a thing is mine and not yours; but there is usually no capacity for standing back and assessing, no possibility of unbiased judgement. Everything and everyone in the environment of the young child is experienced as part and parcel of herself. Likewise she identifies herself with everything else.

The Australian novelist David Malouf describes this state of mind with remarkable vividness in his book, 'An Imaginary Life'. He narrates how for a young child the sentence 'it is raining' has no experiential meaning. The actual experience is 'I am raining', 'I am thundering', in a state of total immersion.

This participatory consciousness is in many respects akin to earlier stages of awareness of mankind as a whole. In both situations the world and all it contains is experienced as something living, dynamic, deeply absorbing - and as a continuing source of wonder. We can say that little children almost literally drink the world into themselves, they take it in deeply, into the rhythms and organic forms of their bodies. They are sense organs through and through, open to everything, even the effects of our thoughts, attitudes, moods and feelings. Out of deep trust and a pulsing urge to learn, they imitate what they experience, not in the sense of deliberately copying but through an instinctive resonance with whatever is around them.

In recognizing this, we find the key to teaching in the pre-school and kindergarten. If children learn naturally through imitating, through doing, then we teach best by doing things which are worthy of being taken in by them. This requires first of all an environment which is wholesome and secondly a high degree of self-examination by the teacher. There needs to be most of all an atmosphere of goodness and happiness. The cares and issues of the outside world have no place in a kindergarten. They bring fear and alienate young children from their still delicate grip on life.

There is so much to be learnt at this age which is often completely overlooked. Simple household actions like sweeping the floor, cleaning shoes, cooking, washing, scrubbing and so forth need to be done properly, again and again, in a rhythmical and whole-hearted way. Through this the child learns to do things thoroughly and be purposeful in all things, no matter how trivial.

Likewise, children of this age long to dance, lightly, gaily, rhythmically. They learn to sing out of the same mood and they learn to listen - to the incredibly soft sounds of a lyre, to the daily story, to the sound of the broom sweeping the floor. Painting and many other arts and crafts can be begun now, but never heavily or systematically. Children learn far more than we realise through repeating very simple actions.

They also learn incredibly much through their play. This play, with the imagination which accompanies it, is a preparation for our work capacities later in life. In play a child is totally concentrated and committed, absolutely whole-hearted in what he does. It is an enormously creative activity and it needs to be respected and tactfully watched over by the teacher. Equally there are times when the play needs to be organised - as in the ring-games which accompany fairy tales and which do so much to prepare for social openness later in life.

One could say in a word that young children bring a mood of religious devotion into life. Their natural disposition of wonder can be a source of all learning right into adulthood.

Where wonder is lacking, learning becomes a duty and no longer a path of discovery. When wonder works still within us as adults, we have each of us the potential to find meaning in what life brings us. We can learn to accept and be grateful. Out of earliest childhood a bridge is formed (if we allow it) from the sense-perceptible world to the invisible spirit which imbues it with life, energy and meaning.

Such things are real foundations for life. They are of far greater importance than teaching children to read and spell and do mathematics during the first seven years. All of this can come later. Certainly these skills can be learnt by children of that age, by some very easily; but the question that we so often don't even think of asking is: What is achieved and what is lost in the long term through this happening?

We do not understand the world with our heads alone. It is with our whole being that we relate to reality - and one aspect of this is what one could call intuitive understanding. Despite all that works against it today, one can develop a sense for what nature is telling us or what another person is really expressing, though the words might be saying something different. One can recognize the significance of a particular event in one's daily life no matter how small it may appear outwardly. In a word, we read - not only letters on a page, but outer expressions of what in itself is invisible. Can one not know whether a person's smile or voice is genuine? Can we not also read the children we teach, through everything they do?

This intuitive sensing of the world can certainly be unreliable: it must be balanced by the rational thinking that belongs to the head. Nevertheless, without it, our head thinking is often superficial and cold: it cannot grasp the full reality.

A good doctor is one who combines an intuition of what a patient is suffering with precise examination based on the skills and knowledge learnt during training. Likewise, the acquired techniques of a counsellor need to be complemented by a

deeper empathy with the other person's life situation, if a healthy way forward is to be found. Detectives work on 'hunches', teachers and parents rely on the ability to experience the world through a child's consciousness. All of this has a connection with the natural (but easily suffocated) participatory consciousness we had as young children.

Through early reading of letters a child's ability to read more universally is reduced or even stifled. Reading a book is pronouncedly a brain activity. It involves an extremely strong inner effort of focusing (the brain, the eyes). One has to cut oneself off from what is around. The outer world becomes once-removed. A veil of letters and increasingly fixed concepts intervenes and this can bring about the tendency, which it is hard to reverse, of estranging a person from real inner participation in the outer world. In a subtle way, the will to be involved in life can be damaged. If this is the case with reading, how much more does it happen through television and all the other electronic devices into which little children get so easily sucked today!

In the last few years a number of books by independent psychologists have been published on the subject of early learning. Some of them - 'The Hurried Child' by David Elkind, for example - have been best sellers. In them the authors give eloquent testimony, out of their professional experience, to the damage that can be caused through early intellectual learning.

Some children respond to these dangers, albeit unconsciously, through the mysterious learning difficulty called dyslexia. The effect of this disability, which can sometimes disappear naturally as the child grows older if it is treated with due respect, is to screen the child from the so-called real world. Such children very often have qualities of imagination and spontaneity quite lacking in children whose eyes have been opened to the outside world earlier in life.

It is these subtle elements of human nature which suffer so much in our pressured times - and it is these which are so absolutely needed if we are to find our way through the crises that come both in our individual lives and in the outer events of the contemporary world.

A good child-experience in kindergarten is a gift for life. Its real fruits may not reveal themselves until one is forty years old or more. Children feed from their environment and those around them no less truly than does a foetus from its mother's womb. What they receive out of it can become a strength of soul - one could even say a kind of spiritual substance - which can be used and developed on into the future.

Rudolf Steiner gives the example of how a small child's ability to bring her hands together in prayer can become transformed naturally in old age into a capacity to bless. What an inspiring realization! One can sense through it how all that is of 'heaven' in little children, even though it may disappear for a while, has the potential to grow and flower again in quite a new form through our years of life. How different and how incredibly important does education appear when we look at it in this way!

Primary School

We can apply a similar thinking to our tasks in primary school. As in pre-school, the important thing is not only the outwardly measurable standard which the children achieve at the time but whether what they have learnt can be transformed into higher, more conscious faculties later in life.

Here again, we have to observe children in quite a delicate way to sense what is developing in them, for really primary school children are in a different world from both preschool and high school. It is not just that they have grown taller and stronger and more capable than their younger brothers and sisters. Something else has begun to develop in the seven-year-old which is not yet there in a child of four. This has to do with the delicate separating off of an inner life from what takes place outside.

A kindergarten child is still at the mercy of what happens in his body and environment. His moods come and go like clouds across the sky. Very much depends on what adults and the outer world bring to him. With the primary school child this is still important, but now the food they want from outside is also such as can nourish the soul. Whereas kindergarten children learn of the world through doing, we can sense how primary school children feel their way into reality. Daily encounters with the outer world are, as it were, tasted and mulled over. They are inwardly felt in an increasingly individual way.

I remember quite clearly how at that age I used to judge my teachers through how they smelt or gazed or walked or spoke. In the presence of some I glowed; with others I felt uncomfortable and small. Even their way of dressing brought up in me a feeling of warmth or coolness. All of this influenced my attitude towards the subjects they were teaching.

Such perceptions, of course, are not fully conscious and yet through them children see into us more freshly and directly than most of us are able to do as adults. They relate more from the heart than the head. And there we have it: it is in the heart that the world is received and judged and responded to. This is the key for our teaching in those years.

Children learn from us most readily if they recognise that we ourselves speak from the heart, that we love what we are teaching and understand each individual child in the class. It is what the heart knows that they want to know. It is what the teacher is as a full human being that they long to respect.

Our challenge is to present our material in such a way that the feelings of the children are touched in a healthy way. These need guidance no less than their thinking and physical activity. This does not mean being sentimental or wishy-washy. It means being human in an authentic way and being artistic.

Art is a discipline and at the same time tremendously invigorating. The world and all that it contains is as much a work of art as a feat of engineering. This urgently needs to be recognised and experienced in our materialistic times.

Through art in its many forms profound truth can be brought to children (as also to adults). We need only think of the wealth of story content that comes to us

out of the cultural past to realize that this is so. In the fairy tales, myths and legends of the world, in the mighty stories of the bible, in the biographies of human beings through the ages, we have an almost limitless source of wisdom and art. And the way in which these stories need to be told and worked with is itself an art.

We can actually say that everything that needs to be taught in primary school - reading, writing, mathematics, history, geography, languages, crafts, the arts themselves, even P.E. - can be brought in a way which is artistic. This means that it is both alive and precise.

It is not easy; in fact it is incredibly difficult and we often fall short - but therein lies one of our great challenges. Teaching itself has to become more than just a job or a technique. It is a vocation and an art. One cannot overemphasize the importance of this in a world which has so much confined itself to utilitarian concepts. We may even say that the future of our culture depends on it.

The fruits of such striving, despite all our inadequacies, are very wonderful. In the inwardly mobile heart of a young child we have a foundation for what, much later in life, can become a capacity for understanding other human beings. In it too is the seed for the kind of moral disposition that goes beyond the conditioning of fear and instruction. If the heart is nourished by beauty, the longing for a morality that is authentic to each individual and each situation develops from within. It becomes a question of self-responsibility, of being true to what lives as high aspiration in one's soul. Conscience comes to birth in the heart, not in the sense of something that is forever making one feel guilty but as a source of wisdom and gentle guidance.

Through this human 'presencing' comes the inner strength to find what is good, beautiful and true in any situation which life brings. It may take a lifetime to develop, but the foundation is laid for it in all that the heart perceives and feels and experiences, in joy and sadness, through the years of childhood.

High School

As children grow through the primary years, there come, more and more often, moments of a more awake consciousness which finally explodes into birth at the tempestuous moment we call puberty. Behind the physical and emotional upheavals of that time, what is happening inwardly is the emergence of a capacity for independent head-thinking out of the primary school child's comparatively dreamy, feeling-thinking of the heart.

The human intellect is something of enormous importance and power, as is clear from the extraordinary scientific and technological progress that has taken place over the past few centuries. Its characteristic is to observe, analyse, classify, hypothesize and compute, but with no intrinsic connection to morality. It can be used equally for good or bad. Left to itself it does its work without pity or feeling. It is also unable to accept the reality of anything which cannot be comprehended by its terms of reference. Just as the sun with its brightness blinds us to the continuing presence of the stars during the day, so does the intellect obscure from us the more subtle and mysterious aspect of our soul lives.

It is for all these reasons that in an education which works with the whole child it is fundamental to withhold the premature awakening of purely intellectual faculties. This underscores the importance of giving children a real trust in the power of goodness and beauty in kindergarten and primary school.

Such a curriculum is born out of respect for the natural processes of development working in children. As teachers we must honour the child's own deep-seated impulse towards growth and maturity. The experience of Rudolf Steiner schools over the past eighty years has given abundant testimony to the fact that if the intellectual faculties of children are allowed to develop in an organic way, at a pace which is in harmony with their physical and emotional growth, then the event of puberty can manifest not only as a chaotic upheaval but as a truly marvellous, budding process.

The thinking which emerges at this time is like a flower of childhood development. It must be treated with continuing sensitivity. It needs to be schooled in very many areas but never in such a way as to become rigid, sour or cold. It must become mobile, clear and light, able to rejoice equally in a musical composition, a mathematical formula, a poem, a play, a bush walk, a meeting, a scientific discovery. The scientist emerging through the disciplines incumbent in high school physics, chemistry or biology, must be no less a poet, a musician, an artist, a crafts person and a person of the world.

For this to be, the faculty of thinking has to be recognised for what it truly is, a spiritual faculty, an immediate manifestation of the spirit in the human being.

Whether it is chained to materialism or whether it has the capacity later in life to bring new creative thoughts into our world situation depends very much on what it meets and how it is treated in these sensitive years of adolescence. Purified and strengthened through inner work later on as adults, it can become an organ for seeing beyond what our physical senses tell us, for beginning, in however humble a way, to sense the presence of the spiritual world in our lives on earth.

In the reverential doing of little children, in the artistic feeling of primary children, in the light-related thinking of the high school, we have representatives of three great streams of human endeavour - religion, art and science.

In outer life today the three are split up; there is almost no common ground between them. Not so long ago, they flowed as one. A Greek temple was equally a place of religion, a supreme work of art and a demonstration of the highest scientific achievement for those times. Likewise with the cathedrals of Europe. For the cultural giants of the Renaissance science was the healthy enquiry into the divine miracle of our existence and art a means of exploring and revealing this miracle in a way that could touch the human heart. Art was no less an exploration of truth than was science or religion.

If we are to find solutions to the great human issues of our times, we will need all our faculties as human beings. We must find again the unity within ourselves, which we have lost. It is not a question of going back, but of finding a new synergy appropriate to our modern consciousness.

Without our wholeness as human beings in head, heart and hands, our science will rigidify evermore into a technology which controls and ultimately stifles us. Our thinking will be bound to materialism and our heart forces will wither away. In all that we do, whether with our brain or our hands, we will be inferior to the machines we have created. It is not hard to see that this is happening already.

Only through experiencing again and again our essential humanness, through our acceptance of an intelligence beyond our own working in us and the world around us, through all that we are and can become as free individuals in the highest sense, will we find the strength, the creativity and the love to use our knowledge and power in an ethical way, in the service of the real needs of our times.

How different education becomes when as teachers and parents we carry such thoughts with us in our work (and play) with children! It can become an ever-deepening insight into the mystery of human growth from childhood to adolescence and into the equally mysterious connections there are between that and what our world is so urgently needing. Child-centred education is neither arbitrary nor dilatory. It is something which requires of us as adults the highest faculties of which we are capable.

It is this which is being worked on and struggled toward in what are now more than 900 Rudolf Steiner schools world-wide. It is strengthening and inspiring to witness the very different circumstances in which this education is taking root today, in vastly differing cultures, economies and continents of the world.