

The Three Stages of Education

1) A Time of Childhood: Pre-School Years

In Steiner Waldorf education the start of formal schooling is delayed until the age of six or seven. Before then, children attend the Kindergarten. Their years there are seen as enabling them to develop a strong and secure base on which later skills can be built. A weekly rhythm is followed, with each day being assigned a particular activity (baking, painting, drawing etc.). Each day also follows a distinct rhythm, with children quickly learning which activity follows which. This rhythm gives the children a sense of security and order which is both reassuring and strengthening in the increasingly hectic nature of family life.

The Kindergarten years are characterised in Steiner Waldorf education as being the years when an ethos of 'goodness' should prevail, where children's good actions and good thoughts can be encouraged. They are also the years when children are at the stage of being imitators, when they absorb like sponges all elements, both good and bad, in their environment. The elements they absorb at this time play an important role in how the children develop in the future.

The Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten therefore places great emphasis on providing good examples for the children to imitate, along with beautiful surroundings for them to absorb. The rooms are softly lit with simple wooden furniture. Toys are natural objects such as pine cones, sanded off-cuts from a saw-mill, shells, hand-made dolls, traditional clothes-horses and veils. This is so that the children's senses can have a rest from the stimulation-overload found in the world outside, and also so that through playing with natural objects, they become aware, albeit unconsciously, of the beauty in nature.

However, perhaps most importantly, playing with 'unfinished' toys, such as handmade dolls with only a suggestion of features, is crucial to the healthy development of the imagination. Just like the cardboard box of old that provided hours of pleasure, children can, by sheer imaginative will, turn the pine cones into money or biscuits or firewood or whatever their game requires. This is harder work at every level than playing with, for example, a doll that can do everything itself, but children naturally enjoy doing it if given the opportunity - and their innate creative talents will blossom as a result. In this sense, Steiner education is holding out a lone standard against the prevailing trend to provide toys which, in their 'finished' perfection, leave children little or no room to develop their imagination.

2) A Time for Feelings: The Lower School Years

The Lower School years build on the work of the Kindergarten and share many of its qualities. For example the class-room environment is still very important and cared for by the teacher with images presented to the children carefully chosen for their inherent beauty. Pupils and teacher together create a calm, beautiful space with a nature table that reflects the changing seasons and children's art work on walls. As in the Kindergarten, children learn the importance of caring for their surroundings through daily responsibilities, such as sweeping, blackboard cleaning, handing out books.

Class 1 (ages 6-7) and Class 2 (ages 7- 8)

The important social elements of education continue in these classes with children learning to respect each other's differences in this more formal learning setting. A prime element of the Class 1 curriculum is learning how to be together as individuals in a small community, learning when to talk, how to put their hands up and engage themselves with writing, reading and counting. The curriculum is taught in a creative, artistic way that addresses and works with the different learning styles and qualities of the children and it is the teacher's aim to engage with and encourage the children's personalities and natural enthusiasm while still promoting an atmosphere of peaceful learning.

In Class 2 the story element of the curriculum consists of fables and saint stories. These provide strong pictures of many human qualities. The saint stories give lasting examples of courage, respect for others, and individuals following their conscience to bring about a better society, whilst the fables provide in story form powerfully moral flashes of the more base instincts, such as jealousy, envy and cunning and their consequences. These qualities are not made conscious through discussion, but are left to simmer inwardly. This gives the concepts the freedom they need to remain alive and effective. They can then provide a deep reservoir of morality and values from which the children can draw on throughout their life.

Class 3 (ages 8-9)

This is the age when children shift developmentally from the experience of feeling at the centre of their world to beginning to feel more separate from it; they begin to look outwardly at their environment with new eyes, and to want to build a new relationship with it. Subjects such as Building, Farming, Mining, have particular resonance at this time and form part of the Class 3 curriculum. These Main Lesson topics are covered historically, geographically and socially, with an emphasis on how the nature of these jobs is to serve their communities and on the hard work and commitment which was, and continues to be, involved. The lessons also awaken an awareness of the interdependence of societies and of their delicate relationship with the environment. This sows seeds for a real experience later on of mutuality and service.

Class 4 (ages 9-10)

The Class 4 children are now at an age when the Norse creation and Norse myths speak to them and they form the main element of the story curriculum. The stories portray communities of individuals in which darkness and evil become more concrete.

Geometry, with its emphasis on visualising three dimensions, is directly relevant to the children's developing abilities to think laterally and imaginatively and in maths, geometry begins, with the children at first drawing by hand, creating beautiful shapes which they then colour in artistically.

The animal world and the relationship of habitat on the animals is explored at this age in a Main Lesson on the Human Being and Animals. Relating the animal world to the nature of the human being in this way encourages children to understand something of the complex relationships between humans and animals. Children are usually asked at this age to do their first project – on an animal of their choosing. This includes a model and paintings or drawings with the resulting work being presented orally by each pupil in the class.

Geography begins formally at this age, starting with where the child is – ie school and home - and gradually in the coming years raying out to take in more and more of the world. This helps the child to feel centred in themselves and in their environment, and relates to their expanding understanding of the world.

Business letters are also introduced around this age, including a wide range of formal letters, enquiries, orders, booking requests and letters of complaint. These encourage objectivity, clarity, precise terminology and the beginnings of an awareness of rights and obligations.

Class 5 (ages 10-11) and Class 6 (ages 11-12)

The child at the age of around ten to eleven is often in a beautiful state of balance. If you look at children of this age you see that their bodies have the classical symmetry of Greek statues and they move and run with a real grace. They are no longer young children whose heads are relatively large compared to the rest of their bodies: they are not yet adolescents whose bodies have become all legs and arms and who often appear not to know quite what to do with their body. This is the age when everything is in balance. Consequently, and to meet the children at this stage in their development, Greek mythology is studied together with its gradual shift into what is recognised as 'real' history.

Geography began in Class 4 with local geography, map reading and drawing. In Class 5 it moves gradually outwards into a study of the geography of Scotland, then the UK, then Europe. Often a large relief map of Scotland or Greack Britain is made out of papier mache and then painted by children working together in groups – an excellent way to get to know the landscape thoroughly.

It is around Class 6 when children's natural capacity for reasoning and judgement begins to awaken. In this class History Main Lessons move from Greece to the study of the Romans where the children are encouraged to explore in greater degree the effects of causality. Often this can be a meaningful time for class 'rules and laws' to be formally negotiated within the class group.

Respect for the environment is also developed through the study of botany which as well as being studied in Main Lesson, is worked upon in art lessons and in craft. Physics begins at this age with children learning to observe and experience in a new questioning way phenomena such as light and darkness, heat, and sound.

Class 7- 8 (ages 12-14)

Much of the children's former behaviour, attitudes and habits can change during these years as a result of the developmental stages they are passing through. The teaching approach therefore needs to change too. They are increasingly encouraged to take initiative and to challenge attitudes and assumptions which they formerly accepted on authority. They are also encouraged to formulate their own points of view - and to understand other peoples' perspective - and the social responsibility of the individual.

In History Main Lessons, the study picks up on these changing needs. It follows the period of change from the old rigid order of Medieval times through the upheaval of

questioning this regulated way of life and moves on to the Renaissance and its discoveries and new excitement in learning.

They also look at the development of scientific thinking and the emergence of the new individual self consciousness that began when long held views of world and faith came under scrutiny. Laws in Art, such as the use of perspective, are introduced as is, in Physics, the systematic work required by scientific methods.

During Class 8, pupils are required to work throughout the year on a major project of their own choosing. This is entirely self-directed work and the results are extremely impressive: examples have ranged from a hand made dolls' house to a beautifully stitched replica 1900 dress, to the design and model of a golf course, to an animated cartoon, self directed video, and detailed work on aspects of sport and influential artists. The projects are put on public display in the Hall and pupils give an oral presentation of their work.

Towards the end of the year Class 8 also put on a major production of a play. Often, because of the healthy effect of learning beautiful poetry, one of Shakespeare's plays is chosen. The whole class are involved in the process: they paint the scenery, make the costumes, perform the music, design the poster and advertising, work the lights, as well as act. This is a profound learning experience for all the pupils.

It is also something of a tradition in the school that Class 8 goes on a five to six week exchange with a Steiner school in a German or French speaking country. They adopt the other class's timetable and, apart from their Main Lesson timetable which continues in English with their own class teacher, are taught the other subjects in the foreign language.

3) A Time for Clear Thinking: The Upper School

As the young people grow more fully into adolescence and into the exercising of their intellectual capacities, the challenge for the Upper School curriculum is to keenly stimulate the intellect whilst continuing to nourish the development of self esteem, emotional intelligence and the imagination. Pupils now seek ideas that can lead them, through their own activity, to ideals. They need experts who can inspire in them the motivation to pursue the clarity of truth for themselves.

The Main Lesson programme, which still works in subject blocks of around three to four weeks, though for the slightly reduced time of one and half hours in the morning, also allows teachers to work out of their own – and their classes' – enthusiasms. They have the opportunity of an extended length of time to enter deeply into subject matter that can go well beyond the requirements of the exam syllabus.

National exams are taken in Classes 10, 11 and 12, with a mixture of English GCSEs, Standard Grades, Intermediates, AS levels and Highers being offered. The particular mix arises from the teachers' study of which exam will best fit into the Steiner curriculum and allow the most latitude for study. To enable the broad curriculum of Main Lesson content to continue, exams are taken a year later than in mainstream. Although, reflecting the different range of pupils' abilities in each class, results vary from year to year, they are generally of a high standard, with an 83% A-C pass at Higher level being a typical result. This is well above the Scottish average and compares favourably with independent

schools in Scotland. It is worth pointing out however that, unlike most independent schools, the school has a comprehensive intake approach and does not select on academic grounds at any stage.

Classes 9-10 (ages 14-16)

The experience of young people of this age is characterised by that of extremes; they swing from one intensely felt emotion to another with great rapidity and enthusiasm and motivation can easily be lost. The Steiner Waldorf curriculum works with this intense polarity in all subjects and in so doing aims to meet their inner experience and sustain their motivation. In the Art Main Lesson, for example, the focus is on black and white charcoal drawings, lino cuts and printing, with special attention being paid to the areas of transition, the 'grey areas' ; in English Main Lesson, tragedy and comedy are studied, with the language of Shakespeare and all its subtleties providing an antidote to adolescents' customary reticence.

In History, they begin an overview of the knowledge they have already acquired in previous years, this time looking at it from different perspectives. The leading ideas that have influenced societies, such as Fascism, Communism and Imperialism, are all discussed in the context of the awareness that violence and fanatic idealism can be a consequence of ideals which are not based in a healthy respect and tolerance for individual differences.

What young people of this age need and so often miss out on nowadays, is the experience of hard physical work. Their bodies have changed and they have muscles and limbs that really benefit from being put to work. They also long to be useful, for it to be clear to them that through their efforts they are making a valued contribution. To meet these needs Class 9 also usually includes a week at the farm in Garvald, a week that sees them, whatever the weather, mucking out manure, feeding animals, building and repairing fences, milking cows and cooking meals to eat together. It is on every level a real experience which, despite the physical hardships, they speak highly of afterwards.

In Class 10 in all the Main Lessons, there is a continuing emphasis on developing accurate observation, logic in drawing conclusions, the ability to relate cause to effect, and skill in honing analytical thinking skills. Pupils of this age often have a real desire to know, not only how something is, but also how we know that it is so. They seek not only information but insight. On their journey to becoming individuals, they are preoccupied with the struggle to define themselves and often at this stage they are 'furthest away' from the adults around them. They need to work to come to the insight that who they are is determined not purely by what their inheritance or life events so far have given them but can actively be shaped by themselves.

One of the aims of this year is for pupils to enter into practical life. They therefore have two week's work experience when, having made their own contacts with an area of work that they are interested in, they have the opportunity of experiencing what that particular world is like.

Classes 11-12 (ages 16-18)

The previous two years can have a quality of droopiness as the young people battle to define who they are and what is important to them. However, Class 11 brings a renewed clarity of relationship to the world and an awareness of the interdependence of all aspects of the world, together with a growing sense of the significance and responsibility

of their role within that interdependence. The young people in these final years of the school often show a remarkable vigour, motivation and maturity.

Main Lessons increasingly ask pupils to approach subjects on an intellectual level that also demands shifting points of view. It is in these final two years that the fruits of the curriculum, which aims to develop clear and creative thinking together with the will to use that thinking to positive effect within the community, can be gathered.

Pupils have now chosen their exam subjects and these are now studied alongside the Main Lesson curriculum.

In the Main lesson on Architecture, physics, art and their relationship to history and sociology all come together as the history of buildings and architecture is explored. A Main Lesson on Philosophy provides another forum for the active sharpening and exercising of the intellect.

Throughout these final two years, pupils are helped to choose their path beyond school. Each pupil receives at least five individual sessions with the Careers teacher/s to help them prepare for UCAS forms and university interviews. They also have interviews with the ISCO (Independent Schools Careers Organisation) and if deciding to leave before their final year, interviews with Careers Scotland are arranged.

As a final gift to the school, the whole of Class 12 puts on a play which they choose, cast and produce themselves. Sometimes they write the play themselves too. The success of this production is the culmination of all the previous years and involves a high level of maturity in social skills to work independently together.

When the pupils leave school at the end of Class 12, the whole class goes on a trip abroad which they organise themselves.

At their final assembly, the students of Class 12 are each presented with a rose by the suddenly very small-seeming seven year olds in Class 1. Its thorns and flower symbolise the young people who are now seen as adults, with their own capacity for both strength and beauty. Parents are invited to what is a very moving ceremony as these young adults turn towards their new journey into the world.