

The 'Main Lesson' Programme

Throughout the twelve years of formal schooling, nearly the first two hours of every day are devoted to what is called the Main Lesson. This programme consists of topics which are studied daily for blocks about four weeks and includes subjects such as:

Astronomy, Farming, History of Architecture, Building, Philosophy, History of Art, From Myth to Literature, Inorganic Chemistry, Surveying, World Poetry, Geography, Mechanics, Physics, Botany, Tragedy and Comedy, Clay Modelling, Physiology, Trigonometry and History.

An important aspect of this programme is the rationale that lies behind when and how each of the subjects is introduced: there is a vast body of insight into why a subject is considered to meet and nurture the children's different developmental stages, some of which will be explained later on when the input for different classes is examined.

The four week time-span of the Main Lessons allows for in-depth study. It also works with the nature of children's enthusiasm which tends to rise and fall in intensity - as can easily be observed in the phenomenon of playground 'crazes'.

All children remain together in the same class for their Main Lessons until their final school year and, *irrespective of their exam choices* continue to study the broad span of subjects in the Main Lesson programme. This ensures that whether they veer towards the sciences or the humanities in their exam subjects, until they leave school they continue to receive a wide-ranging cultural knowledge that encompasses arts, humanities and sciences. This breadth of understanding has been most favourably commented on by University lecturers and tutors who have had former Steiner pupils in their seminars and tutorials.

The system of Main Lessons has several positive consequences which, in addition to promoting enthusiasm for learning, also help to encourage young people to become responsible and caring adults. Whilst they may be in different groupings for some exam subjects or for reasons of numbers in craft and art work, throughout their time in school pupils stay together in their class unit during the Main Lesson programme. As a result they witness and learn to develop respect for each others' strengths and weaknesses - and to encourage each other in their attempts to 'have a go' when faced with a new challenge.

The whole system of Main Lesson blocks - which allows children to study both intensively and extensively - is a powerful vehicle for enabling pupils to appreciate the interdependence of all facets of life. It also allows them to explore the broad sweep of the historical process which underpins all events.

Because Lower School teachers usually teach *all* the Main Lessons subjects, from history to the sciences, they have to work hard themselves to develop the required knowledge. This is particularly true for teachers who may not have had much musical or artistic experience in their own younger days and who, in order to become a Steiner teacher, must learn to develop these skills in themselves. The experience of an adult whose learning is ongoing and who is enthusiastic about continually expanding his or her knowledge is a powerful one for children.

Throughout the school, to a large degree, the teacher is seen as the source of the knowledge. This helps to inspire in children a respect for adults which is arguably being eroded by the growing emphasis on technology.

Foreign Languages

All pupils learn French and German from the age of 6 years. Almost all children continue these studies until the age of sixteen when they sit national exams in both languages. Many continue with one or both languages until they leave school at eighteen.

Learning through Doing

The Steiner curriculum places particular emphasis on learning through doing. This addresses the kinaesthetic learning style of many pupils, encourages team work, and perhaps most importantly in this age of the computer, addresses the need for children to learn to put their physical energy and will into a project.

Pupils of all ages are encouraged to learn through doing. In the Kindergarten where the young children revel in being busy, they dig in the earth or the sand, climb trees, walk planks, build games and tidy away afterwards, paint, draw, perform plays, sew, hammer, cook, make craft items, bake bread until they need to have a short lie down to regain their energy.. Once in the Lower School, an intrinsic part of the Main Lesson is what is known as 'Rhythmic Time'. This can last up to forty five minutes during which time desks are cleared away and the children reinforce their oral literacy skills with poems and songs with actions and learn how to count their tables through movement with bean-bags, or counting games, or take part in class clapping rhythms or African rhythms with sticks. As the children mature so the demands of this Rhythmic Time become more challenging. In all of this work they deepen their concentration skills through the intense focus that is required.

The principle of learning through doing is integral to the Main Lesson programme and is continued extensively in subject lessons, where the programme of Arts, Crafts, Music, Gardening, Eurythmy and P.E. ensures that children are active. Cooking has recently been introduced for the sixteen year olds who share the results at a meal together as a social occasion round a large table.

Arts, Crafts, Music and Drama

Throughout the whole curriculum there is a very strong emphasis on art, music, and craftwork. From class 1 onwards, in addition to their place in Main Lesson work, they are taught as subjects in their own right. Skills are built up slowly and the children grow through a period of 'apprenticeship', in which they learn the basics, to one of refined and original self expression in the Upper School. Drama is also an integral element of the curriculum throughout the school.

Art

All subjects, including science, are approached from an artistic point of view and children are encouraged to bring an artistic element to all their book-work. Children are guided to experience the different properties of colour through wet on wet paintings that follow a story, with shape and form gradually being introduced as they move into watercolours, charcoal and oils. Many visitors to the school comment on the quality of the art work and

wonder if the school only accepts artistically gifted children. However, the results are rather proof that, with the right kind of encouragement and teaching, most children can become skilled in the arts.

Crafts

Children begin with simple craft work in the Kindergarten using natural materials. By the age of seven, boys and girls have learned how to knit woollen animals on knitting needles which they have made themselves out of wood. They progress rapidly to knitting patterns into their work and the nine year olds design and knit a patterned hat; the ten year olds sew a pencil case with cross stitch designs of their choice and then knit a pair of slipper socks on the round with 4 needles, learning the age old skill of turning a heel.

Woodwork begins at age eleven when children learn the properties of wood and the essential skills that have traditionally been used by artisans.

In the Upper School all pupils also have the opportunity to work in detail with clay, and with basket-weaving and copper metal work.

The connection between fine motor control and the later development of flexible and creative cognitive thinking is increasingly supported by neurological research. Arts and crafts can lead to the enhanced ability to have the imagination, determination and self belief to pursue projects in all areas of life

The crafts also reinforce a strong sense of mutual dependency between people (for example the farmer who shares the wool and the person who buys the woollen garment) and between the human being and the environment which provides the materials. This primary experience is the basis not only for ecological thinking, but also for a sound grasp of economic principles.

Music

Music has an extremely important place in the curriculum. Its connections with developing flexibility and clarity of thinking and its ability to raise academic standards are increasingly well documented. All children learn as a class to play simple pipes, and then move on to recorders. Class orchestras are formed wherever possible, and school orchestras are timetabled as part of the curriculum. The children present their work to the whole school at various assemblies and festivals and are encouraged to take part in the regular series of pupils' concerts held throughout the year.

Drama

Children benefit hugely from working together and drama is a wonderful medium that can empower children on an individual level and as well as encouraging greater social cohesion in the class. From Kindergarten onwards drama is an important feature of the Steiner curriculum with all classes working on and performing to other classes and parents dramatic pieces that range from fairy stories and myths to Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare. Children work with drama not only in English, but also in French and German. From time to time the school puts on a musical such as Fiddler on the Roof, Oliver, The Wizard of Oz. These often involve children from a wide range of classes and parents and teachers and are examples of a real coming together of the school community.

Gardening

Gardening lessons provide children with the experience of actively following the seasons, together with the realisation that their work has a direct and visible impact on their surroundings. This can have an enormously strengthening effect on feelings of helplessness many children experience in the face of global uncertainties in the environment.

Gardening lessons formally take place from around the age of ten onwards. These enable the children to play an important role in looking after the school grounds and usually at some stage they will be given a small plot of land to work on in small groups.

Eurythmy, Games and Sport

Throughout the Lower School the children have lessons in what is called Eurythmy. This is a form of movement unique to Steiner schools that is also a performing art and a healing or curative therapy. It uses music and poetry to encourage the development of individual coordination and balance and requires children to be very focused, not only on their own movements but also to those of the group as they move together through structured forms.

In the early years of the Lower School, movement and games are very much part of the Main Lessons and class lessons. Children play traditional games like battleships, Granny's footsteps and tig in many varied forms including versions that encourage multiplication tables; they learn to skip on their own and as part of a group; to balance on planks; to throw and catch accurately; to play games in French or German. All these activities are very helpful for their social development as well as their physical and cognitive development.

Most classes learn how to juggle. This is a wonderful way of encouraging concentration, dexterity and the vital ability to risk failure on the way to success.

The Role of Imagination in Steiner Education

Where would we be without our imagination? Our cultural civilisations have arguably been built entirely as the result of our ability to imagine. In order to be motivated to do anything, we need to be able to see in our mind's eye the result of our work. Without imagination we might still be sitting in our cold caves unable to visualise how things could be any better. Imagination is also crucial to the development of empathy, a quality essential to living respectfully together as a society. One could argue therefore that the lynchpin of any successful education should be the cultivation of the imagination.

The Steiner Waldorf curriculum places a huge emphasis on nurturing the imagination (together with the strength of will needed to put bring imagined ideas into reality). The art, craft work and drama all make a major contribution to developing these qualities. Perhaps more than anything else, however, it is the role of stories in the curriculum that helps to foster imagination in children.

The vital place of stories.

In the past, all cultures told and retold stories to their children. It was their way of passing

on their values to them and of ensuring their moral development. In our culture, this practice has become diluted with stories that have lost their power to educate at a deep level.

Carefully chosen stories develop a feeling for beauty and awaken the imagination. Fairy tales, fables, legends and myths are archetypal human experiences clothed in images. They have beginnings, middles, ends and sequences and they give children a conceptual framework with which they can orientate themselves and understand their experiences. They encourage collaborative learning because children become participants in their community and culture. The element of paradox, so frequently found in stories, lays a strong foundation for the paradoxical nature of creative and flexible thinking in later years. They also help children to digest and make sense of their feelings.

Stories form the bedrock of the Steiner curriculum, particularly in the Lower School where children still live and relate to experience in a pictorial way. Stories are told in most subjects with fairy stories, fables, creation myths, Persian, Norse and Greek myths and legends providing a rich source of nourishment for later life. History is presented to younger children in the form of true stories that can fire the imagination.

Although stories are chosen for their inherent moral value, any 'message' remains entirely implicit within the pictures of the story and the children are free to draw their own conclusions. The children are, however, nourished with what is essentially a positive picture of the world, where good triumphs over evil, where hard work and courage win through and where creative imaginative thinking can triumph over physical strength.

A further facet of imagination is its link with memory. In order to remember anything, we have to be able to re-create inner pictures in our mind's eye. Conversely, to imagine anything new, we have to be able to remember where we have seen something that might be a useful 'pattern' and then visualise how, metaphorically, we might adapt that 'picture' or pattern into something different. This is the basis for all invention. In this way, imagination and memory are therefore interdependent. The Steiner Waldorf curriculum recognises this and in addition to working to strengthen the imagination, it lays great store on the cultivation of memory through the learning by heart of songs, poems, and plays.

Delaying Abstract Reasoning

One of the major areas where Steiner Waldorf education diverges from mainstream is that of the age at which it is considered helpful to encourage children to use the cognitive thinking skills necessary in making judgements, choices and in thinking analytically. In line with Piaget and Vygotsky and an increasing number of contemporary neurologists, Steiner Waldorf education holds that up until the age of eleven or twelve, children are not easily capable of thinking in abstractions, reasoning logically or making critical judgements. Until that age their thinking takes place in a more pictorial way, with the pictures arising out of their strongly developed feeling realm. It is only after the age of eleven or twelve that children can increasingly distance themselves from their feelings and achieve the kind of intellectual, conceptual, analytical thinking which is able to weigh up evidence free from the power of personal emotions.

These are perhaps unusual ideas today, when generally young children are increasingly asked to make decisions or judgements based on an intellectual understanding of facts.

It would seem that an earlier start is thought to assure a more effective outcome. However it is the schools' experience that, as with learning to read which, if delayed until the children are developmentally entirely ready for it, comes easily and joyfully to the majority of children, so if these cognitive skills are not formally exercised until around the age of twelve, not only do the thinking skills and abilities awaken easily, they also possess a real strength of insight and challenging power. This is certainly the experience of those involved in teaching at University level who recognise former Steiner pupils' keen thinking and questioning skills.