

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

It is great to see such a large number of people here to participate in this very important and challenging matter in discussion this evening.

I work for the Steiner Schools, of which there are about nine hundred worldwide. In England there are thirty-one Steiner Schools, both large and small and approximately 45 early years groups known as kindergartens. Parents and toddlers in all sorts of combinations abound and we are seeing a greater demand for Steiner education. Moreover, we now have schools in Israel, there are schools growing in the Islamic world: Egypt, Dubai, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, as well as in the countries like India, Nepal, China, Latin America, and now in Africa: Tanzania, Kenya, Sierra Leone, as well as South Africa. So, it is part of a way of approaching education that seems to be still very important for many parents, and parents create most of these schools. They are not usually founded by a group of teachers who have a conviction or an ideal they want to put into practice, but actually by parents who have questions about their children's education and how they want their own children to be. They are not necessarily satisfied with what is already provided by the state or local community, they look for other ideas. They find this way of working with children and then start the work of founding a school, which is an enormous challenge.

We tend to take schools for granted, they just happen to be there, they have been there for the last one hundred years or more, they have been provided for us. However starting a school yourself is a very different sort of challenge and I will come back to that a little bit later.

Although one can speak about Steiner schools around the world, one has to also understand that each one of these schools has its own individual character, not one school is the same as another. What connects them is a view of humankind, a philosophy that looks at us as human beings and tries to understand our society, our culture, our individuality, in a different way. It tries to look deeper, to look beyond what we normally see, the superficiality of our world, but to see what actually lives deeper in us as human beings, and to find there is a connection to everybody. At the level of human beings we share this world, and it is important for the children to have that sense, as they grow, of the humanity of the world. Regardless of our background, our religions, our beliefs, our politics, we have in common that we are all human beings. At the same time, respecting the difference, we are all unique. Just as every culture, every people, every group has its own uniqueness, so do we. Not one person is like another.

So it is trying to create an educational way which meets these two seemingly contradictory demands: respect for the individual and what they bring, and at the same time creating a sense of global responsibility, global sharing, global justice, and global interest. That is a very high ideal, and as you have probably guessed, almost impossible to achieve at this moment. And yet we feel it is very important that we try.

So although we have these schools, we can't stand up and say, "Look folks, at Steiner schools, we have the answers to these problems". Of course we haven't, because in these institutions are mirrored all our weaknesses and all our failings.

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26.1.05

We are making an attempt, with humility, to try to do things differently for the sake of our children, but we would not claim to have all the answers.

Some of the things that we find, we think would be beneficial for many more children than actually come to our schools. We want to develop a dialogue, because it is so important at this critical juncture that there is an educational dialogue where the child is at the centre of that dialogue. We are very pleased to see that it is not just us speaking from our few schools, but that this is the way that the world is going. You only have to look in the newspapers or the journals to see that the educational world is in tumult, it is being questioned from all angles, all sides. Sometimes this goes under grandiose names, for example, in Europe it is called the “Lisbon Process” after an agreement the heads of European states made in Lisbon in 2000 to create a Europe as the foremost knowledge economy by 2010. A bit of a pipe dream, but nevertheless, an important development in international education. If you look at the European scene you will see in every country difficulties, questions. From early childhood to university qualifications the whole thing is shifting, reform follows reform, new laws appear and disappear. There is endless debate, and it now comes on the front page of our newspapers, not page six or seven.

Education is a theme for our times, and since it is a theme of our time, this enables us to look at it slightly differently. How far should the education of our children be related to the past, to the old traditions of compulsory education, of the formation of nation states? Thinking about education as it has been formed in Europe since the 19th century, one would see that it had very much to do with the development of a national identity. The curriculum and the history taught the view of the world from a perspective that came out of the centre of the nation state, in order to create citizens of that state, of that nation. With the flowering of the nation state over the last few hundred years we have seen changing, shifting, different allegiances, different identities. We are all faced with this in our lives - how our identities are no longer fixed. We somehow merge and mix and change in the course of our life, but also in our social structures and forms. Our relationships are ever changing, and this raises huge questions of values, of morals, of how we can live together in this new world.

That also reflects on how we see childhood. I received a book yesterday, “The Future of Childhood” so I was reading it in the train. At the beginning the author says here “In particular the distinction between adults and children, once firmly established as a feature of modernity, seems to be blurring. Traditional ways of representing childhood in discourse and in image no longer seem adequate to its emerging forms.” So we recognise this in the world around us, in our economic, technological, professional lives, our daily lives, the ever-shifting sands of our world. But it also affects childhood.

Children don't live in the same world that we lived in as children, and they don't have the same experiences as we did as children. This means that if we want to meet them as children on an educational level, we have to take their development into account, their world into account, and not presuppose that what we experienced as parents or grandparents is necessarily right for the children in our care now. If the world continues as it is, if we look at the changes in the last decade, we can't even imagine what world they will inhabit. You think of the

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

questions that we are now faced with regarding the environment, regarding global warming, regarding genetic engineering, cloning. All these huge moral dilemmas come out of our capacity to investigate and explore the world, it raises huge questions, and in ten years' time we don't know what we are going to face. If we go ten years back, how many of us were even computer literate in any form? Mobile phones, all these things now that are here, prevalent and part of our society, weren't there. We can't tell what the world will be for our children. In the past there was a sense of gradual evolution, yes there were cataclysms, there were changes, but in a sense there was a sense of continuity through childhood. Not any more. We now have an uncertainty, we live in a risk society, and we can see how governments and policy makers have to deal with this question of risk, and can see how difficult it becomes for anybody to really find a healthy foundation on which to stand in education.

So the other side of it may be unnerving, it may be anxiety-making, but it also creates possibilities. If you look at the world of art and artistic endeavour, no work of art is produced without a risk. One has to have courage. You have to do something new. To create is newness, and with all these questions regarding education and the future of our societies, we have a possibility to create something. So what may at first hand seem difficult actually creates something out of which something new will come, and our children have a contribution to make to that.

But how should we set about it? Again, it will not have escaped your notice that Auschwitz figures quite prominently in our thinking this week that it is sixty years since the liberation of Auschwitz, and the full horror of what was there is being exposed to the world. If you read the survivors' diaries, reports, the interviews now, one can't help be moved by how inhumane human beings can be. And this inhumanity can be seen around us now. Sixty years ago, yes, Auschwitz, but think of Rwanda, Bosnia, and all the other events of catastrophe, human catastrophe meted out to other human beings. We still can be very inhumane. And in our schools the sort of view is well, yes, that is the world as it is, but what can we do about it?

We can do something about it if we work with our children. Really, to try and create something where these things don't happen in the future on such a horrific scale is to do with the qualities of childhood. It is with the children that one can start to create a more tolerant, more respectful, more loving world. The childhood experience that we had, helps us as adults to understand and work with each other in a way that doesn't reduce us to this gross grotesque humanity, where we give out to each other this horror and this cruelty.

I think we all have to accept as human beings that this cruelty lives in all of us. We can't turn round and say "they are the evil ones". In a way this is what Auschwitz showed the world - how people who were educated, cultured, well off, were able to descend to those depths in their treatment of others. The lesson was how "normal" it was. And so when we look at these questions we have to also recognise in ourselves that we have our weakness and our failings too, and the same with our children. So we want to work in a way, or try to work in a way, that strengthens what is good. We feel that we can do that because basically every child is good.

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

Every child comes to us as parents or teachers with a gift. Every single child brings something to the world, and the school is the place where what the child brings can be respected. You work with the child with what they bring, not implanting all sorts of things that you want, or society wants, or employment wants, but actually what the child brings with them. They bring something quite golden. There is a golden aura to all children, and school could be a place or try and be a place, where that is unfolded, given the space to develop. The children need to be surrounded with love, they need a sense of security, they need a form. So around the child the school creates something that enables the child to feel at home, at ease, to be him/herself. And they have to learn. All citizens of our society have to have skills. They have to read, write and all the other things. Knowledge, work with science, all sorts of skills, is part of the school life, but if one can put it together with respect for the child itself, then education becomes a meaningful experience, and it sets a basis for the rest of one's life.

More and more we are seeing now in the scientific press, with neurobiological research, with psychological research, that those earliest years are so important. What the child absorbs from us as adults, what they take on from their surroundings, is for life. If a child is abused or turned into a child soldier or into prostitution, or given drugs that are not necessary, or whatever it may be - if that childhood is taken away, if the gifts of childhood are stolen from a child, it becomes a lifelong dilemma, a lifelong difficulty for the individual involved. And so we owe it to our children to give them the best start, but to respect where they come from. The famous Polish educator called Jan Kirksak worked in the Walsall ghetto with the children there. He was a well-known educational philosopher, a practitioner, not just a philosopher. He worked with children and then went on with them to his own death, to die with his children in the gas chambers. He wrote aphorisms about education which are very moving, and this is one of them:

“Find your own way, learn to know yourself before you try to know children. It is a mistake to believe that education is a science of children and not of man”.

And what he is pointing out there is that we are all learning together. A school is not just a place where children learn; it's where everybody learns. It is a community of learning in different ways. Teaching is a learning profession. It is also very rewarding to see that in the educational world around us, at the moment, the stress is on learning. The word "teaching" is being used less and less, and the word "learning" is being used more and more. We've got it with the European Union with these words “Lifelong Learning” - that is the great theme of educational reform in the European Union in all countries - “Lifelong Learning”. To have this lifelong learning process, one must have secure and healthy individuals for that to take place. That is what we endeavour to do - to try and put those foundations there, so that when the child, the young person, has grown up and left school, learning is a joy. Interest in the world is awake, the childhood curiosity, this ability to absorb and to see in a fresh way, stays with us for life.

School isn't a place which is finished at eighteen. My taxi driver this morning was telling me as he drove me from the station in Bristol to the school, “When I had finished school at eighteen it seemed to me that was it. Finished”. He said that was the impression you got. You went to school, you learnt, finished. But it is not like that, which the taxi driver also was pleased to hear. Not everybody thinks like

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

that. With Lifelong Learning you start and you grow, and you go on and on growing until the last breath. It's always about learning, and celebrating that.

Now if one wants to work with children in that way you have to sort of turn explanation upside down you have to turn it completely the other way round. This was implicit in the founding of the first Steiner Waldorf School - the first Steiner Waldorf School. Rudolf Steiner was the Austrian philosopher, who developed these ideas, and he started in Stuttgart in 1919, and a cigarette factory paid for the school. Not politically correct nowadays - I can't imagine a Rothmans school - we would be in trouble! However, Waldorf was the name of the cigarette factory, and the managing director heard Steiner speak about education. He said, well I am going to give you some money. I am going to buy a café, and he bought a cafe and started a school. The ideal then was to say "Let's start a school where the children of the managers and the children of the people on the work place go to the same school". At that time that wasn't done. Managers' children went to one sort of school, and the people working in the factory went to another sort of school, and I think in some respects that exists today. We've got our differences in this country too, with the two streams - independent and maintained schools. So the idea was to bring them together because they said at the time:

How will we ever develop a cohesive society if we start by separating our children? How will they learn to live together and understand each other and respect their differences if they haven't met as children?

So in this school in 1919 that idea was then implanted - in 1919 at the end of the First World War - a terrible catastrophe in which eleven million men died needlessly. For what were these sacrifices in the trenches and all the rest of it? So the idea to form something that really helps humanity live together in the future was at the basis of the school. It came out of a lecture that Rudolf Steiner gave. He said very simply, "Look at us as human beings - we have so many problems, we've got political problems, economic problems, environmental problems". Already beginning in the twentieth century they were there too, and he said: "Everybody thinks of programmes, let's have a programme to solve this one, let's have a programme to solve that", and he said "that won't work because they are not deep enough. Let's form education without a programme - let's start by looking at the nature of a child, studying the nature of a child and how human beings learn, and then teach spontaneously out of what you find. Not a Curriculum, not saying you must teach this at this age, they must do that at that age, you have to do this then, but just out of the relationship find what is necessary, what you should teach, what fits the child"

So you are building your education on the basis of a relationship, not on an abstract knowledge, not with abstract programmes, but the relationship to the child. This is because children learn out of the relationship to the adult world. We wouldn't walk without an emotional relationship to the adult world. Walking is a social activity; the child does it by seeing adults walk. A child brought up by gazelles like the "gazelle boy" in North Africa or the "wolf children" in Ceylon didn't walk, they couldn't. They didn't of themselves walk. Animals brought them up, so they crawled on all fours. They never stood up, and even when they came into the adult world, it was too late. They could never walk properly again, nor could they speak - they couldn't really, even though Kasper Hauser and others were given

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

special lessons. All these examples we've had since the French Revolution of children being brought up outside human society, never could find their full humanity again. So from the very beginning the child learns to be a human and to be one of us from absorbing what is around us, what grows around us?

So that is a social quality, and into that come our emotions, our feelings. It is not so important what we know, what is important is what we feel about what we know.

We live in an information society - wonderful. We can get information now which human beings could never receive before so fast, so quick. It is all there for us. More and more we have a greater and greater understanding of the physical world, of the universe and society, or of history. So much information is produced, but how do you turn that into wisdom? How do you turn that into knowledge that has an ethical element to it, your own ethical moral values? How do you relate that to what you know? And that is a question for the human emotions.

If you think back to your own schooling, do you remember what you learnt in your lessons? Or do you remember the teacher who taught you? You may know one or two things that you learnt, but the memory stays of a particular teacher for good or ill - one that was strange or peculiar, or one that gave you the chance, who said the right word at the right time. It is amazing - the right word at the right time, what power that has to change our lives. Just the right phrase can give us a sense of confidence, of worth, of the future. And that comes from the relationship between the adult and the child: the relationship between the learners.

In that respect, teaching is then an art. It is an artistic development to create that art of being human. Yes, we are all artistic creations, we are constantly creating ourselves as artists, and if we bring that quality into education, it gives the child space. It gives the child a possibility to breathe their own confidence in themselves that they have something to bring, something to offer, something they can do in the world. And so you'd find if you visited our schools a wealth of artistic work, colours, singing, dancing, movement, drama, many different forms of art, because that helps one come to terms with one's own metamorphosis, one's own "changingness" as one grows up and gets older. It is also very important in any educational enterprise that we undertake and go forward with that artistic quality which means courage, innovation, creativity, the ability to stand up and be one's self.

A recent research project called “A Europe in the Creative Age” came out a few months ago, looking at the future. They said that, really, for education we have to think of the three “T”s. Always in the past we have had the three “R”s: Reading Writing, Arithmetic. In Waldorf Schools they call it the three “Hs”: Hand, Head and Heart. That is becoming a bit of a cliché generally now, but this one came out with the three “Ts”, and I think it is quite interesting to see what these three “Ts” are.

One of them is “technology”. Technology now sets us many challenges, but if we think of the root of the word technology we are talking about “téchne” - what we make with our hands, what we do with our hands. That leads us then to the world of information technology and mega bites, but it basically starts with these. If we want to work in a highly technological way, again we have to have a relationship to

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

what we create, and so in the curriculum itself we need to have a building up of the quality of the hand. Now it is interesting to notice that we sometimes think this (pointing to his head) is divorced from this (waving his hand) but it never is. You will notice again in neurobiological research, again and again, it is coming out very strongly that our thought processes, our logic, our thinking, are related to our movement. They are not separate. If I make a gesture when I am speaking, I have not got a thought to which I make a gesture; it is not that way round at all. The movement of the hand helps me develop the thoughts. It is not the other way round - I am not depicting what I have already thought, but my hands are helping me create the thought. So what we do with our hands is very important for the whole logical development, and it is clear now that movement of the hands creates the synapses and networks of the brain. The longer people work with their hands into old age the more lively minds they have. You can always go on developing that, those skills through manipulation of the hands. So technology is not just called electronics but it goes down to the basics of the sand pit or the painting or dabbling in mud. Play - why do children play? Why do they spend their time putting blocks on each other or wheeling carts to and fro? It is actually the beginning of technology. It is an experiment with the hands to manipulate and use the world. Another “T” they come up with is “tolerance”, and it is a new sort of tolerance. You have sort of English tolerance which is inbred a little bit, which means you do your own thing and I will do my thing, and we won’t disturb each other too much - just get on with it, and I will keep quiet. That is one sort of tolerance. And very good it is too. It has enabled us in this country to avoid the cataclysms which other countries have had to face. We have managed to muddle on with each other without too many difficulties.

But there is a new sort of tolerance they talk about - an active tolerance, a tolerance where we take an interest in each other, where we look at our different ways of life, our different modes of being, and not just tolerate it, but become interested in it. We have a living interest in what we do. Now it is so enriching. I have a very fortunate role; I am extremely lucky to have this. I whiz about to places and drop in on different parts of Europe from week to week, and it is fascinating to see how many different cultures, how many different ways of doing things there are. None is particularly right or wrong - they are different, and it is wonderful to see how human beings can create so many different forms and so many different ways of answering questions. But the tolerance comes out of saying “I am interested in what you do. How you do it? I’ve got my way, what is your way?” without prejudice, without judgement, but actually just to look at it. And that is a tremendous joy. Just as the hands play a role in education, so does that interest, and in our schools we try to work with this idea that it is in the interest. The interest is the basis of morality. Being interested in each other is where we find our human values, where we find a respect that isn’t taught from outside as in “You must be tolerant.” There is a nice scene in one of William Golding’s novels, which describes him at school. He is in a religion lesson and he is not paying attention - he is looking out of the window. The religion teacher says, “Golding, what have I just said?” He didn’t know. The teacher says “Come here” picks him up, slaps him around the face saying “God is love, love is god”. It is not just from outside, the capacity to love has to come from the inside, and that

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

interest in each other, this wanting to know each other, is really a foundation for love. It is a foundation for being able to be together, but it is interesting.

And so "interest" - a simple word, and yet in it lies the capacity to develop our own moral convictions, our own sense of the other's worth, and also the worth of the world. In it lies the capacity to develop a sense of the worth of our environment, the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, the geological kingdom - out of interest. And it is possible to teach in a way where that enthusiasm is woken up in the children, where everything is interesting, everything is amazing. It is wonderful, whether you go down to the smallest atomic sub-particle, whether you are talking about the height of Mount Everest that we found yesterday to have sank four feet. It's all interesting, and if the children feel that from the teacher, from the adults around them, that gives them a moral basis on which they can develop their own lives in their own way, in freedom, and yet create the cohesion I was talking about earlier.

The third "T" "Talent". I have actually mentioned that before. We're all born with talents, we all are. We are all slightly one-sided one way or another. We are better at some things and worse at others. Every child has a talent, and in a class of children one's got many different talents. We try and work so that each talent is respected. Now some have intellectual talent, which is very important for our world. Intellectual talent - they can do examinations, they can learn, they can grasp things, they can have memory, and all the rest of it. They can read a book and know what is in it. But that is only one talent. It is important, but it is only one talent. There are other talents.

Kindness is a talent, being able to sympathise with another human being is a talent, to play a musical instrument, to be able to bring joy is a talent. Shouldn't schools work with those other talents as well? Shouldn't we in the school classroom, in the playground, in our environment, respect all the talents that human beings bring with them, and help them balance them? It is nice to be kind, it is important to be intellectual, you can try and balance that together and help the child develop areas in which they are not so strong. The school's role is to take all that into account in partnership with the parents.

It is not school and home, but more and more we are seeing in our educational world that that distinction is blurring. We don't just send the child to school at nine and they come back at half past three. It is becoming much more a communal activity. In fact in Sweden they have what they call the "Plaza Concept" where, when they start an early years group in a town or a village, everybody is involved: the bankers, the farmers, the business everybody. They all come together and say "How should we do it in our town? How should we set up an early years centre?" It is not just left to the professionals, the department, the LEAs. "We will all think about it", and what they said in doing that is "we will strengthen the democratic process. We become democrats".

Everybody agrees that this gives a foundation for local community in a new way. Our old communities are dying, as is the traditional nuclear family. Our families are fluid, changing relationships more and more. We have to create something new - let's start with the children. Focusing on the childhood brings communities together and gives them the ability to work together in a new way.

Christopher Clouder

“Steiner Education and the Challenges of Today”

26.1.05

Now these are just very basic principles. I wasn't going to describe to you how to do things and what to do, but that talent also applies to the adults in a learning community. The collegueship in a school should be celebrating somebody else's talent - not me and what I can do, aren't I a wonderful teacher or whatever, but what you can do - great. We should encourage each other to do things we never felt we could do. We should be bringing out in all of us these talents, and then we can become teachers, then we can become adults that work together in a way that becomes an image of our striving. Our children can follow and respect and learn from us. We try and do that and we have a long, long, long, way to go, and we will never get there. It is Utopia is unreachable, but nevertheless, in the trying we make discoveries. It is through such evenings like this that we would like to share such discoveries, because we need help, we need to get better at it, we need to learn more from each other as human beings and to be able to have a dialogue like this. I think it is a very important part of that process, so thank you for listening to me.