

On the Question of the Three-Fold Structure of the Main Lesson A Stimulus for Discussion

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We reprint this article because it contains some very challenging thoughts about some aspects of Waldorf education (e.g. the threefold Main Lesson). The editors invite responses from teachers for our next issue – Neil Carter- Ed)

Preamble

An article for the ninetieth anniversary celebration of the Waldorf school movement, which appeared in 'The Goetheanum', issue no. 39 of 25th September 2009, concluded by pointing out three tasks. The first of these was to produce a new balance between the forces of form and impulse within the school and within the school movement.

The second one, according to the author, is meant to examine and investigate the habits of teaching that have developed. What we are doing – is it (still) the right thing?

The third task was mentioned as schooling and practising a new awareness for the meaning and content of Steiner's art of education; this represents a paradigm shift from all conventional educational approaches. We need this awareness in order to shape the future of this art of education.

The author also formulated these three tasks in his lecture at the Congress 'Waldorf Schools: 90 Years' of Future' in Stuttgart on 23rd October 2009.

The theme of this article is intended to tackle the second case where action is required, examining what habits have developed in the practice of teaching in Waldorf schools.

The example that will be worked on should serve as a stimulus for people to concern themselves with other themes in this sense. The theme chosen is the common practice of dividing the main lesson into three parts at the beginning of the day.

Synopsis

The classic division of the main lesson in classes 1-8 into a rhythmical part, a work part and a story-telling part affects the way the class is at this time of the morning. There appear to be no grounds to support this structure in the statements or recommendations of Steiner. The case is made that this division is an obstacle for the essential rhythmical and artistic activities and that it can be a hindrance to the process of learning. It is also demonstrated how this division of the morning contradicts the *Study of Man* in important aspects. Finally, it is portrayed how the behaviour of pupils may be judged on the basis of this three-part division.

Introduction

No teacher will fail to think up a meaningful way to start the day with their pupils. In the lower classes there may be a morning circle or else various children will talk of their experiences. Or else they will sing a song, practise tongue twisters or solve a riddle, which has been set the day before, or else the children show one another what they have done at home. In higher classes maybe a poem will be said and mental arithmetic practised. Or else they will clap a rhythm which will subsequently be varied. In short, getting in the right mood for the school day is a really special moment: it is a new day, a day full of promise. The air is full of potency. How am I to greet the children? How will the artistic process begin?

Everything is new; *this* day has never been before! Nobody knows yet what will happen, what this special day will bring. You sense it; you do not fix anything yet; you feel the mood and seek the way to start. Is this the moment for the morning verse

or do you have the song first? Are the children 'there' yet? Not quite. Perhaps an 'echo exercise' will be done with the little ones so that they can feel the geography of their bodies. However, the ball exercises for the integration of the senses of sight, hearing and one's own movement will be done in the break in the school yard or, if it rains, in the corridor; now they will take too much time. In any case, getting in the right mood for the day must not take too long, for the morning will bring a lot. The attempt is made in fifteen minutes to be so far that the morning verse can be spoken. In short, getting in the right mood is a highly individual process between the teacher and the group of pupils. A lot depends on the mood. What is the mood of the morning throughout the year? How does one go from the tender beginning of the day to events of the day in the approach to spring? How does one do this in advent in winter, or else in summer?

What effect does an established, programmed, rhythmical part with definite components have? Saying a poem, playing the recorder, saying their report verses, singing a song, the morning verse, what effect do they have in the morning?

What effect does it have on children or pupils, if this part is extended to over half an hour, often requiring three quarters of an hour? What do we perceive? Does their concentration increase or do we see fatigue and as they get older demotivation (which is interpreted as weakness of will)? Is the expectation of the day disappointed by the beginning, as it only brings something that has already been? Is not the *eager expectation* of what the day may bring deadened in advance, if the child enters school in the semi-conscious certainty that it will take a long time before learning starts, until something new will appear. How does *motivation nowadays* develop in view of habitual activities in the rhythmical part, which does not change through the years and which is continued in the very same sequence?

What about the question of time? If a 'storytelling

part' has to follow on from the 'work part', is there enough time left to absorb and learn new things? Does the story part have to necessarily be at the end of the main lesson? How *intensive* is our lesson, how strong are the learning experiences that are necessary for the children to take them on as a matter of course and thus for their motivation?

Which rhythm is wholesome? Is this three-fold structure the cause of the possible slackness in the main lesson? Which habits can be justifiably formed, where are their limitations? What room for manoeuvring is taken away from the main lesson through this structure?

These are all significant questions; questions which impinge on the quality of the lesson.

The Thinking behind it

There are no grounds to be found for dividing the main lesson into three parts *in Steiner's work, neither in the lectures nor in the books of the teachers' meetings*. This does not necessarily need to be the case, if something meaningful were to be developed. But, whatever is new must then be in accordance with the understanding gained through the Study of Man. However, we do not find any kind of justification except platitudes such as 'all activities need rhythm' (Georg Kniebe). That is true; only the question is 'does this three-fold structure mean rhythm or routine?'

In the chapter 'Elemente des Waldorfunterrichtes' (p. 86) of the book 'Die Zukunft der Waldorfschule' the author of this chapter, Peter Loebell is careful. He names the most varied possibilities of shaping the main lesson but he avoids assigning them to a three-fold structure.¹ This is a correct approach in my view.

In 'Zur Unterrichtsgestaltung im 1. bis 8. Schuljahr an Waldorf/Rudolf Steinerschulen' Thomas Stoeckli writes that Steiner did not use the term a three-fold structure and that teachers should feel free "to shape the lessons individually according to their own insight"(p. 25).² All other references to further

1 Loebell, P. (2000) Elemente des Waldorfschulunterrichts in Kleinau-Metzler, D. (Ed.) Die Zukunft der Waldorfschule. Perspektiven zwischen Tradition und neuen Wegen, Hamburg: Rowolt Taschenbuch Verlag (p. 86).

2 Pedagogical Section of the Free High School for spiritual Science at the Goetheanum, Dornach, and the Pedagogical Research Centre for the Association of independent Waldorf Schools, Stuttgart. (Eds) (1997), Zur Unterrichtsgestaltung im 1. Bis 8. Schuljahr an Waldorf/Rudolf Steinerschulen', Dornach: Verlag am Goetheanum.

reading take the three-part division for granted as characteristic of the main lesson.³

Therefore, if the three-part structure cannot fall back on the instructions of the art of education, then, all at once, it appears to be without any other evidence to support it except that it helps the children to concentrate⁴ or wakens them up or lets them breathe.⁵ However, these are qualities that, according to experience, do not come about through the rhythmical or other parts. Rhythm does not arise through structuring the main lesson and through poems and singing etc. Rhythm arises only through the way in which the teacher teaches. In order to reach an understanding of the processes, we will have to look first at the time of day and at the phenomenon of sleeping and waking.

Time of day, Time and the Forming of Habits

As a rule the main lesson is given in the first part of the morning. In a general instruction Steiner declares that the early morning should be used for new learning, the late morning for all that is based on repetition and the afternoon for artistic activities.⁶

Every school must at least strive to make something possible in this direction, which will surely be easier for small schools than large ones.

They are the questions of hygiene in the timetable.

Yet what is the early morning? In the first part of the morning we (children and pupils too) are different beings than at other moments of the day. We can observe quite a bit looking at ourselves. The morning makes us more receptive, more open for what

comes, but in an active way, whereas in the evening this receptivity is quieter, less active. We are not yet properly 'preoccupied' with the pictures of our day's experiences, in the afternoon the senses are already flooded with impressions. It is true that *the early bird catches the worm*. There is an American study which shows that with a half hour shift in the early morning the results of learning, the receptivity, of the pupils change. Too early is too early and too late is too late. The timing of learning in the morning must be kept to pretty exactly.⁷

Another thing is: how do we treat time ourselves? Do we make use of it as a constant with a linear course through the day or do we treat it as a quality? In the former case we (and the pupils too) will quickly become tired through it, in the second case time will become the pulse between concentration and relaxation. This can become rhythm, not through the routine of a structure, but through the teacher letting the pulse of time breathe through the activity, *tension, relaxation, focusing on a point, expanding it and differentiating, in short: breathing*. The heart too gives a significant picture of this, that of the systole and the diastole. The teacher becomes an artist of time, if he or she uses time in this way. (In eurythmy we speak of 'contraction and expansion').

In general, the striving is to teach the children or pupils 'proper habits', for these form a part of the ability to learn as it develops; an absolutely meaningful endeavour. How do you do this? To a large extent it is a question of the teacher finding equilibrium. We can compare it with a feeling for *music*, between tension and the easing of tension,

3 Sandkuehler, b. (1999), *Lernen Kinder mit dem Kopf? Die bedeutung von Bewegung und praktischen Tun in der Waldorfpädagogik*, Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben (p. 42). (Do children learn with their heads? The importance of movement and practical work in the Waldorf pedagogy.)

Kniebe, G. (1996), *Aus der Unterrichtspraxis an Waldorf/Rudolf Steinerschulen*, Dornach: Verlag am Goetheanum (p. 20).

Richter, T. (ed.) (2006), *Paedagogischer Auftrag und Unterrichtsziele – vom Lehrplan der Waldorfschule*, 2nd Edn., Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben.

Eller, H. (1998), *Der Klassenlehrer an der Waldorfschule*, Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben (p. 26).

Brater, M., Hemmer-Schanze, C., Schmelzer, A., (2009) *Interkulturelle Waldorfschule. Evaluation zur schulischen Integration von Migrantenkinder*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaft (p. 84).

Patzlaff, R., Sassmannshausen, et al. (2007) *Developmental Signatures. Core Values and Practices in Waldorf Education for Children Age 3-9*, Ghent, NY: AWSNA (p. 127)

4 Keller, U.L. (2008) *Quereinsteiger: Wechsel von der Staatlichen Regelschule in die Waldorfschule*, Wiesbaden: GWV VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaft, P. 345.

5 Richter, A. (2009) *Schule mit Theaterprofil in Schneider, W., (Ed.) Theater und Schule: ein Handbuch zur Kulturellen Bildung*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. P. 169.

6 Steiner, R. *Education as a Force for Social Change GA 296, Lecture 2*, p. 50.

7 Bronson, P. and Merryman, A. (2009) *Nurture Shock* New York, Twelve Hachette Book Group, pp 38-44.

between quiet and loud, between fast and slow, high and low. If this equilibrium is not present, then habits turn into *rituals*. Then the *justifiable* forming of habits runs the risk of becoming an end in itself. The quite unintentional result will be that the will to learn is frustrated as will be the 'desire for learning', for it is not being addressed or not sufficiently addressed.

If this is the case, the door is opened for *educationally undesirable power relationships* and the exerting of influence that impair a healthy relationship between the teacher and the pupils. That happens when the teacher subordinates him- or herself to the dictates of ritual. The freedom of being together has vanished. (See the section on Assessments and Reports).⁸

This leads to unrest in the children's souls, for in the morning they have come in the mood for learning, not for going through some ritual or other.

The 'rhythmical part' takes on the character of a ritual, when, for instance, the pupils of class six have to recite their own report verse in front of the class on the day of the week on which they were born. (We are now leaving aside the question whether this habit is psychologically suited to this age). As such the habit is not bad. (Even if we must hope that the verse is no longer needed after half a year: the pupil will have developed and left the verse behind). However, if this process has not taken effect, then we see the ritual: a pupil who is as uninterested as possible recites his verse in front of a bored 'mass' of pupils. The procedure is of no value to anyone. It takes time, though, easily ten to fifteen minutes from a certain class size upwards. If you add in the remaining elements of this part of the morning, truly precious time is gone. Thus, I dare to question whether playing the recorder in the first part of the morning is the right activity. Just watch a group of children that plays the recorder in the early morning and a group of children who do this in the music lesson later in the morning. A great difference is to be noticed; (a difference which, strangely enough, is not to be noticed with singing). How about the much praised stamping, what does

that achieve? You can see that it makes the children tired instead of awake. Stamping makes them tired, not awake.

The real rhythm, which we must always heed, is not between parts of the main lesson, but rather the rhythm which reveals itself with the children or pupils. When do they get tired, when do they waken up? That is the essential consideration. Whoever teaches according to this principle, will dissolve half the discipline problems just through doing this.

Let us consider the process from the viewpoint of the understanding of man.

Everything that we do with our bodies, that we do through the will to be active, for example, moving about, dancing around in a circle, stamping with our feet, clapping, all these activities are of spiritual nature in their essence. All this is achieved by a thought, which changes 'magically' into a movement. Thus, Steiner characterises gymnastics as the most spiritual subject (!). The peculiarity of this spiritual activity, for example of a movement, is that one is not in it with one's wakeful consciousness. *We sleep in our wills*. This is why these activities make us tired. The idea is very widespread that you stamp around vigorously with a group of children in order to get them awake. In fact, it has the opposite effect. You can observe it with the practising of the times table when it is linked to movements. Then you will see the pupils carrying out the procedure 'as in a dream'. Spoken in chorus a kind of 'trance' ensues: it is carried out as in sleep. Teachers will do well to lose no time in breaking this link between *movement in sleep* and *knowledge gained through wakefulness*.⁹

If the rhythmical part is now followed by a 'work part', in which the pupils have to take in what comes from the teacher, unrelated to the subject matter, then the intentions of the art of education have been prised out of their context and dislocated. For these presuppose that the rhythmical element enters the learning process just in the way described above. If what has been described above becomes living, it will make no

8 Steiner, R. (1986) *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, Anthroposophic Press, GA 303, Lecture 6. Steiner calls this inappropriate, harmful exercising of power by the teacher over the child or children the 'vampirising' of the relationship.

9 Steiner, R. (1992) *The Study of Man*, Stuttgart, GA 293, Lecture 11. Aka 'The Foundations of Human Experience'

difference how long a 'work part' lasts; it can take an hour, it can be shorter or longer; the pupils will cope with it, for the rhythmical intensity will satisfy their will to learn. It is significant that every pupil takes home the experience that he has learnt a lot. This is the most essential thing in the main lesson.

Story Telling

It can be a blessing in the life of a class community, if a story begun earlier on is continued in the final quarter of an hour of the main lesson. When is it a blessing?

When the pupils have the unconscious or semiconscious feeling they have worked so hard that there is just enough time for a story. If too little has been done before this, the pupils experience mainly unconsciously (though this unconscious element is expressed through restlessness): 'we have only just started to learn something and now it is all over'. Then the story has a disturbing effect. Here we have an example of a time rhythm. Every activity needs its own time.

What is the right time for storytelling? What is the 'kairos' or right moment for, for storytelling? Having the storytelling definitely at the end of the main lesson is no considered point of view; rather it is something set in stone. The storytelling must fit into the course of the day. If the class teacher has a lesson, maybe, at the end of the school day with his own class, this is ideal for the story-telling. It is splendid to close the school day with a story.

Does the story-telling have to happen on the day of the religion lesson? How many tales and stories can people 'stand' in a day, in a week? The handwork teacher reads something as the children are so hard-working, on the same day there is a religion lesson and the stand-in teacher has brought a story from his 'emergency reserves' with him. Have the teachers in the college meeting concerned themselves with the issue of how many stories a certain class hears in the course of a day? In order to catch that we can ask in the college meeting how, for example, the day has looked for class 5b: which lessons did they have, in which lesson was a story told? Besides the rhythm of the lessons there is, therefore, also a rhythm of the course of

the day, which must be considered. Conversations at the college meeting are helpful with regard to this.

What does a surfeit of tales and stories mean for the pupil? All intellectual activities mean that the pupil's ego connects with their body. The ego 'settles'. All pictorial aspects in the lesson mean that the ego loosens itself from the body.

That is a rhythm specific to Waldorf education, seeing to it that the processes of the ego, connecting with and loosening itself from the body, are in the right relation to one another. If the former activity is too strong, the ego becomes a prisoner of the body; then, the needs of the body dictate life. If the second activity is too strong, the body loses its bearings. Life is exhausted through unfulfilled wishes of ideals that are never realised.

The way to this rhythm is teaching out of the life rhythms portrayed here.¹⁰

Assessments and Reports

As described at the outset, the three-fold structuring of the main lesson is considered from the perspective of outsiders, by researchers, as a distinguishing feature of the Waldorf method, because it is to be found everywhere and in the literature, as portrayed, it is not examined critically anywhere at all. However, those who view Waldorf education critically from the outside and research it do have (justified) questions about this lesson structure.

We are now touching on a fundamental question.

Let us put it this way: if the Waldorf movement does not examine and take a critical look at its own educational practice, science will do it instead. And it is already doing it. It would certainly be better if this capacity for critical dialogue would be exercised in the school movement beforehand. If this is not the case, we will find accounts such as the following.

The problem of the rhythmical part of the lesson improperly featuring as a part of the report is described thus from the perspective of an outside person, "With the daily routine running into the main lesson (the rhythmical part

10 Steiner, R. (1993) Meditatively acquired Knowledge of Man, GA 302a, Lecture 4. Aka 'Balance in Teaching'

is meant) *Max seems to fulfil the requirements in this initial ritual in a way that at least saves him from being interrupted or excluded. The subject matter in this sequence (of the report) is not an area with learning content such as competence in reading, writing, arithmetic etc., but rather behavioural requirements, i. e. supporting the ritual, fitting in with the class and loyalty towards the teacher. As there is no indication in the written recommendations on Waldorf school reports that the rhythmical part is meant to be an item in the class teacher's report and, therefore, this does not represent an aspect worth assessing, in Max's case the assumption must be made that what is being highlighted is the matter of course. What would be taken for granted with the other pupils would be a demanding task for Max. It could be supposed that his expressive and effusive personality is inclined to throw up behavioural problems in such strongly formed, ritualised, collective activities."*

This is the description of the researcher who is following the pupil Max's biography. Then he quotes the next sentence from the class 2 pupil's report, "*However, he often needs – to the dismay of the teacher – this first quarter of an hour to quieten down and then be able to join in calmly with the work part."*

You are not quite sure how to read this last sentence. Does it mean that Max needs the rhythmical part in order to quieten down or that after the rhythmical part he needs a quarter of an hour to come to himself so as to then join in with the work part?¹¹

Of course, not giving the teacher a chance to speak in such a piece of research is also scientifically questionable. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that it follows from this passage how both the outsider's view and the insider's view takes this structure of the main lesson as an essential characteristic of Waldorf education.

The attempt has been made to roughly portray the following: this three-fold structure does not belong to the essential characteristics of Waldorf education. On the contrary, it can be a hindrance to the development of a teacher-pupil relationship which breathes between teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This article was written as an example of the necessity after 90 years of Waldorf teaching to examine the way it has developed; not to damage it, but rather renew it and reinvigorate ourselves.

I have formed the conviction tried and tested through the years that the source, or spring, of renewal lies in the original intentions. If this spring begins to bubble up in us, we will become viable for the future. The possibility will then arise of not having to make a lot of unnecessary diversions. Something new does not need to be taken hold of because it is new, but which has to be dropped later on because it did not fulfil its promise after all. For instance, has the idea of 'moving classrooms' been evaluated? Does it achieve what people hoped for from it? Has the idea developed further? Has this approach to teaching, which has now existed for years, been evaluated?

However, time marches on. If we do not undertake this renewal through the questioning of our teaching habits ourselves, others will do so or else they are already doing so. At this juncture, we can point to the publication of Professor Heiner Ullrich, 'Vom pädagogischen Bezug zum harmonischen Passungsverhältnisses'¹², to Gunther Grasshoff's 'Zwischen Familie und Klassenlehrer'¹³ and perhaps to Georg von Breitenstein and Fritz Schuetz's 'Paradoxien in der Reform der Schule'¹⁴.

With all these passages we may say what we please – one thing is and remains an omission, namely, that we did not write them ourselves. Consequently, it is necessary to face up to this research. ♦

11 Idel, T-S (2007) *Waldorfschule und Schuelerbiographie*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften, p 85.

12 Rupert, M/ Badawia, T / Luckas, H (Eds.) (2005) *Ethos-Sinn-Wissenschaft*, Remscheid, pp. 237- 262.

13 Grasshoff, G (2008) *Zwischen Familie und Klassenlehrer*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften.

14 Hoelbich, D. / Grasshoff, G. (2008) in *Paradoxien in der Reform der Schule*, Breitenstein/Schuetze (Ed.) pp. 217-229. This analysis of the activity of the class teacher is very well worth reading. It is important for us to be observed in this manner. We are offered the opportunity of judging what is the 'archetypal intention and what the practice of teaching makes possible (or not).