



Children Learn in Images

Why Waldorf Schools Put so Much Emphasis on the Concrete

by
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translated by Nina Kuettel

“Can God make a rock that is so heavy that He can’t lift it?” This difficult question was asked by a five-and-a-half year old boy. He had come into the “philosophical age” shortly before formal schooling, and had begun to question the world with many “whys.”

Preschool age children do not have any abstract concepts available to them for philosophical questions. In their place, a concrete picture arises. Reality must be perceivable. If a mother says something like, “If he doesn’t come soon, I’ll see red,” the child will look around for something red. A child will listen to the same short fairy tale over and over again because he always experiences it as something new. He lives in the present.

A year later, he is standing before a tree. Suddenly, he closes his eyes and, after a while, proudly announces: “I can still see the tree.” Or, another time: “The man who was here this morning is still in my head.” He has discovered that now an inner image can form without any outer cause. New capabilities that wish to be activated are at his disposal. They are the same forces that previously structured his body and internal organs, predisposing their forms and functions. After the change of teeth, the only organic activities these forces are responsible for are further physical growth and maintaining life processes. Therefore, a portion of these growth forces (Rudolf Steiner described them as *Bildekraefte* are freed for other tasks. Now, however, they structure and form in the mental domain.

The imagination wants to be addressed with images.

In school one meets the needs of imagination by teaching, wherever appropriate, using clear, descriptive images in order to address the forces of

imagination and fantasy. It may begin with little things. For instance, a first grade teacher might ask the class to put a padlock on their mouths instead of being content with “Be quiet!” But, above all, the teacher will familiarize the children with the most important pictorial world there is: fairy tales. Every folk group on Earth has its own rich treasure of fairy tales. The “building blocks” of these stories come from the real, everyday world known to the children, but they do not follow the same rules. They point to an imaginative world behind it all. All the dangers, tests, and triumphs are representative pictures of the tests and dangers that a soul must pass on its way to a more spiritual world. In this world justice prevails, and the good is victorious.

If a teacher is interrupted with: “There are no such things as giants and gnomes,” it is usually enough to point out the incontrovertible fact that there are such things in this story. Sometimes one must emphasize that they cannot be seen with our normal, everyday eyes. Generally, curiosity to know what comes next will win out. If the children are able to slip back into listening (and this lengthier listening time is also an ability that must be slowly cultivated), then the question of believability is soon forgotten.

The so-called “nature stories” have a different function. As a kind of precursor to geography, they tell of rocks, plants, and animals, not in a clinical way, but rather more like fables in which something of their being is expressed. For example, if a daffodil has a conversation with a violet, one can imagine that the daffodil in its yellow splendor feels very much superior until the little violet shyly points out that the daffodil is completely dependent upon its pantry, the bulb, whereas the violet bravely stretches out its tender, little roots into the ground! In that way the violet knows all about what goes on in the earth; that is something the daffodil cannot possibly know. One can be sure that from then on the daffodil and violet will be looked at with totally new interest.

Reprimands, corrections, and all moral education are most effective when presented packaged in a story. Perhaps a child has done something wrong; now the event passes through his mind one more time, as if someone else were the wrongdoer. He can now look at everything from a distance, objectively, and the corrective experience will regulate itself. Of course, storytelling is only one part of the wealth of moral teaching that can take place.

The will is educated by doing.

One always tries to lead the children into a new area of learning by first engaging their will through their own activity, making sure their feeling nature is included, and, finally, allowing their understanding to awaken to what is being presented. In this way a child will gradually take part in the things they can do and what they know, as a whole person.

A few, small examples: When teaching writing, again, it is pictures that are put to use; but this time they are pictures that incorporate the forms of the letters of the alphabet drawn on the blackboard by the teacher. The first graders copy the drawings, discover the letter forms, and then “take the forms into their bodies” by first walking the forms on the floor, then drawing them in the air or with their hands on paper, before they ever take up a thick pencil. Such consciously led movements, guided from the inside out, now belong to the newly gained abilities that were previously practiced through form drawing.

But some students have long known the alphabet letters. A teacher is consoled: “But now I can do them right.” They no longer appear as random symbols, but rather have an understandable origin.

With arithmetic, it is the feet, and also clapping hands, that first come to know the ever lengthening times tables. If it is structured rhythmically by emphasizing every second or third step, for instance, one gets the times tables that are later committed to memory. The operations of arithmetic are introduced so that, for instance, in addition, one starts with the whole sum, which is divided, thereby allowing something to be given away. A different mental gesture is associated with this than when part after part is piled up.

Cultivating memory requires special care. That means it must be challenged and trained. After all, it is memory that safeguards our personality, the I-consciousness. In a time when everything is stored and retrievable, the memory is almost always neglected.

The world speaks through the teacher.

Whatever is learned or told, it is the teacher through whom the world speaks. The teacher will very naturally become the responsible authority in all matters. This does not mean an ordered or forced authority, but rather one that is loved and also needed. At this age, out of healthy egoism, children are searching for people they can respect and admire, whose judgments they can appropriate for themselves, whose feelings they can “borrow.” They need this orientation not only to become knowledgeable, but also for their moral and esthetic sense. Children are overburdened if they are expected to make decisions prematurely.

A small scene: A mother wants to be especially solicitous and asks her daughter every morning: “What do you want to wear today?” One day her daughter stamps her foot and yells: “I don’t want to always have to say what I want to wear!” During another incident, after the mother has reprimanded her child for something, she hears, to her surprise: “Why didn’t you tell me I couldn’t?” While in the first seven years, the children want a good role model that they can imitate, now they desire an authority figure whom they can follow.

Of course, guidelines that go by age apply only in a very general sense, and are always adjusted according to individual needs. However, today one notices a decided tendency toward “always earlier.” One of the reasons for this is the social conditions and civil environment that require awareness and independence from children already at a very early age. Another reason is the opinion that early schooling benefits educational progress throughout the school years. The opposite is true. Early learning happens at the expense of forces that still should be in use for building up the physical body. Granted, the damages are not immediately apparent. And the cognitive abilities are brought into an illusory bloom that disappears in the upper grades and cannot connect itself with the whole person.

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