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Remedial Education

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In the Oxford Course, Dr. Rudolf Steiner presented a powerful directive to Waldorf teachers:

*Our rightful place as educators is to be removers of hindrances. Each child in every age brings something new into the world from divine regions, and it is our task to remove bodily and psychical obstacles out of his way, to remove hindrances so that his spirit may enter in full freedom into life.*

All teachers, whether they work in regular Waldorf schools, remedial programs or curative Camphill communities, can glean inspiration from these words. They are as powerful and important now as they were then.

They are also helpful as a way to describe the remedial work, also referred to as educational support work, which has a long history in the movement and is now rapidly growing. Remedial work addresses the ‘obstacles to life’, many of which are cultural and environmental, although of course they also can originate in heredity and individuality.

Obviously, we all have these obstacles to a greater or lesser degree, and it seems that modern life may be exacerbating them. The number of children with challenges in normal classrooms is growing. Many teachers respond that a third or more of their class struggles with school work. This situation presents educators with challenges too. We are not there to ‘fix’, but to listen. *Who is this that stands before us? What are these children asking of us? Each child needs to feel validated and respected. They need to know that we are there to help them find their place, not to feel that something is wrong or missing.*

**The Young Child**

In order to understand what might be inhibiting the child we need some understanding of the forces or dynamics that are influencing that child. For the purposes of this article, which is to give a description of remedial work, let’s look at a very condensed version of the process of incarnation.

There are different streams or forces at work in the incarnation process. One dynamic is the individuality of the child, the eternal ‘I’ which is finding a way to manifest. Through time, this unfolds. However, it must unfold in a body that is shaped by heredity forces, the second dynamic. In addition, the child inwardly carries a third dynamic. This is a kind of spiritual inheritance, a rich tableau of experience that springs from the movements of the cosmos and creates our human form. Basically, this plays out as a will to come to earth. If the child feels that the physical world has similiar-
ties to the inner experience of the spiritual world, and the 'cosmic' geometry, then the child develops a confidence and gratitude for this earthly life.

These three dynamics help create the wonderful child who comes to us and, upon closer observation, become apparent. What we observe is the relationship among these dynamics—a preponderance of one over another. Therefore, we might experience a strong individuality, or a clear family resemblance, or a clumsy child.

In addition, as citizens of the earth in this age, we are influenced by the environment, which does not always support a healthy relationship between these dynamics. The child today faces increasing challenges: lack of movement, vaccines, a hectic lifestyle, poor nutrition, the loss of childhood games, media influence, poor sleep habits, and so on. This is our world today. These are the conditions inherent in our times—the gifts and the challenges. They are calling us to establish a cultural renewal of education. What are we preparing the children for? If a child is having problems in school, what do we look to? We cannot blame parents, or ourselves, or the child. We need to ask questions about soul care, providing the right kind of work or will activity, and presenting healthy images to counteract the dehumanizing ones.

**The Child in School**

When some children arrive in the educational setting, they do not have the capacity to learn by imitation in the kindergarten or out of the rhythmic system in the grade school. The child may not be able to take advantage of the educational environment because it is coping with a body that it cannot control. Often this is due to disharmony in a stage of the child's development. Consequently, the work of the first seven years, the development of the four 'lower' senses, has been compromised. The child who has not fully completed these stages of development will exhibit various kinds of behavior:

- being in constant motion;
- poor posture when sitting;
- or needing to be placed a little bit away from the other children in order to prevent little skirmishes.

Generally speaking, these children are not behaving as well as they want to behave.

When the teacher meets a child with these kinds of behaviors, questions will naturally arise, real questions about this specific child. Often, the teacher will seek the help of his or
her colleagues and ask for a ‘child study’. A circle of interested people is formed around the child to better understand him or her, and develop a focused course of activity. This is usually the time when other people are included to provide their professional services or therapies.

The Educational Support Teacher is often brought in at this point as part of the team. His or her therapeutic approach is to recapitulate the path of development. In other words, the support teacher looks for stages of development which have been compromised and repeats them in age appropriate ways. The idea is to provide activities that enable the child to develop capacities for learning. These activities will connect the child again to their path of coming into the body through the movement and the senses. Some specific examples of intervention for the child who needs to repeat the missed or incomplete stages are: ‘the grand crawl’ by Dr. N. Glas, (see The Extra Lesson by Audrey McAllen); early movement pattern work from sensory integration to release reflexes, (see The Out of Sync Child by Carol Kranowitz. Berkley Publishing, Perigee Books, N.Y. NY) or even juggling to help with bi-lateral integration.

The Mood of the Educational Support Classroom

As we have said, the purpose of remedial work is to recapitulate the developmental path. It is important to approach the recapitulation activities with a certain inner mood, which is centered on the child rather than the ‘plan’. We are there to offer an invitation to the higher self of the child. We are inviting the individuality to enter fully into developing capacities for the physical body. However, it is ultimately up to the child’s higher self to accept the invitation. Whether we are doing the Extra Lesson alongside the child or doing crawling games or drawing forms, the mood will create the environment for the modeling of these new capacities. The most successful teachers have joy for their work that arises out of a feeling of gratitude for the opportunity to do these movements and games with the children, and because they know that these movements are based on a true picture of the real working of the human being.

Of course, getting the children to do these activities frequently enough and with enough concentration to actually make a change is often quite challenging for the teacher. Teachers often remark about how children today need a lot of practice in order to gain control and fluidity in their movements. Various forms of ‘Wonderful, let’s do that again’ are frequently heard in the classroom. Consistently, I have observed that the way we give direction and praise is very important when working on the developmental activities. For instance, with younger children we can use images such as ‘moving like a little snail creeping along’. However, already in the latter part of the second grade they are ready for real challenges. A ‘Can you do this?’ approach will resonate better with them because they are usually thrilled to have a chance to try a new skill. Generally they like to watch and do rather than get a lot of verbal direction and comment.

Remedial Work

The educational support teacher will look to the child’s earlier stages of development, spe-
cifically the first seven years, and observe how well they have synchronized and harmonized. In the first three chapters of his book, Being Human, Dr. Karl König speaks about these first seven years as a development of consciousness which urges the child to engage in two important processes. Briefly, the first process is to reach out to the world by developing discrimination in the senses. The second is to come into verticality by differentiation in the muscles. So, on the one hand we have the ego working through the gate of the senses, and on the other we have “standing”, which is all the activity and development that arises when we come to grips with gravity. These two gates are opened in childhood. However, when we look around us, we see that the environment does not support these processes.

Let us look at ‘standing’ and the lack of proper movement. One inhibiting influence, for example, is the baby walker. Baby walkers, (a stand-up seat surrounded by a supportive ring) hold the child in an upright position, enabling the child to walk before he or she has built the proper strength and coordination of muscles to do it alone. If a young child spends too much time in this apparatus, future movement problems will arise. Fortunately, the American Association of Pediatricians has finally announced that the walkers are dangerous and that they inhibit proper development. However, it will probably be a long time before this information filters down to parents.

These walkers are just one of many reasons Educational Support Teachers world-wide are observing that more and more children come to school with limited movement capacities. One manifestation of this limitation is the retention of early reflexes. We can simply describe retention of early reflexes as a condition that, when one muscle moves, then other muscles react. There is a lack of freedom in movement.

In the classroom we see strong evidence of these conditions and other blockages in posture and movement. Children may be uncoordinated, have a strange gait, or give the impression of being insecure in their movements. They are not relating to gravity in a real way, and consequently they are not relating to the three dimensions in space. For example, children who have retained the neck reflexes will sit at the desk to write with their paper way off to one side of the desk, one arm straight and the other tucked in. They often sit on one leg. They also usually have an immature pencil grip. Or we see children with vestibular and balance difficulties. They have their feet wrapped around the chair legs, or rock their chair, or have trouble on the balance beam.

Generally, children who have this kind of behavior are doing the best they can but their attention is split. They are trying to keep their limbs in order and listen to the teacher, but there is not enough energy for both. Of course, like anything else, everyone has their own tolerance level before the energy needed for coping with these obstacles becomes too high, and then we see a lot of acting out.

Tools for the Educational Support Teacher

An Educational Support program is a resource for the class teacher; one aspect of a multifaceted support network for a child. In the Educational Support work, there is an emphasis on movement. We work with balance by
walking on wooden beams and large stones. We use calibrated balance boards. We roll, swing and enjoy crawling games to release reflexes. We write, and pick up marbles with our toes. Then we cultivate more complex capacities. We practice the exercises in *The Extra Lesson*. We draw forms, maybe according to temperament and constitutional types. We might practice rhythms for temperaments. All these things are drawn from the wealth of Dr. Steiner’s view of child development and some from appropriate mainstream educational theories.

Movement is recapitulated according to the developmental path. When working with this approach, the remedial teacher will first work to release reflexes (see *Sensory Integration and the Child* by Jean Ayres. Western Psychological Services, Los Angeles CA) then the symmetrical activity, followed by bi-lateral work. Next, we do the ‘crossing’ work and strengthen dominance.

The Extra Lesson work, developed in the 1960’s, is an essential focal point for any remedial program. It strengthens the developmental stages that may have been compromised and helps develop the senses. Its proper practice allows the children to connect their spiritual inheritance, described earlier, to their bodily experience, which also has a connection to the currents and forces of the earth. These are the archetypal movement patterns of the human beings and the earth which we all have in common (see *A Psychology of Body, Soul and Spirit*, Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophic Press). The pre-earthly pictures of the working of the hierarchies, which the children have carried with them in their souls, can now find their reflection in the physical body. During the day, the child does these exercises which correctly educate the movement system. Then in the night, they carry these remembrances of the movement with them into sleep and are able to experience a kind of match between the day activity and the night experience of the movements of the cosmos. This helps them achieve a feeling that their inner experience is shared by those who are teaching them and gives them courage and capacities to incarnate.

These activities relate to the ‘structural’ aspect of the human being—the nerves, muscles
and bones. Movement, painting and drawing compose each lesson. All the activities were developed to encourage and develop harmony, dominance, spatial orientation and awareness of body geography. Inner and outer movements are brought into relationship with each other.

Another path of the remedial work is through the gate of the senses. The development of the four lower senses or bodily senses is the work of the child from birth to 7 years and these senses often need to be tended and enriched (See Working With Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children, Henning Köhler. Association of Waldorf Schools in North America). In our program at the Detroit Waldorf School we do a variety of sensory enrichment activity. Sometimes we make tea for the aromas, warmth and taste. In order to enrich the sense of touch we hide objects in canisters of grain or sand. Another great ‘touch’ activity is to wrap the child in a blanket, like a cocoon, which helps them get a feeling for their own boundary and skin. We sometimes vigorously clean the balance beam with sand paper to really get our movement system going. Another favorite activity is to paint bands of colors to help their eyes track before reading. We also listen to tones as a way to awaken their ears before a phonics lesson.

The educational support work, or remedial work, is based on Waldorf Pedagogy. So, unless a remedial teacher has been additionally trained in a therapy, we are not considered curative teachers. Nevertheless, since we are all experiencing that more and more children require medical help, we also turn our studies to the curative work. As one doctor said, to the agreement of his audience at a lecture, ‘Some children need medicine just to sit in their chairs’. So, any curative and medical knowledge can only help the children in our care. A study of medical issues such as medical types, the function and effect of the major organs, allergies and an understanding of the influence of proper nutrition etc., are a vital and necessary part of the training programs.

An Educational Support Program

The educational support work may have different functions in a school depending on the school’s needs. These include: supporting the class teachers by helping with observations and assessments, instructing individuals or groups of children, helping the class teachers directly in the classroom, and serving as members of the Care Group. The work could also include organizing doctor visits and establishing relationships with off campus resources.

Most schools now recognize the need for some kind of program and are making steps to integrate one. These steps include writing a program description (often depending on who the teacher will be); how many students they think they can serve; what other resources are available; how the program will be funded and who else will be contracted, such as an outside tutor.

A Child’s Destiny

Another, and often complex aspect of the remedial work, involves the question of destiny, or what the child came to earth to do. As a teacher, I feel that I am always working on a carefully worded invitation to the child’s higher self. How do I help you manifest your destiny? Usually, helping this manifestation means removing obstacles and building capacities for
learning — letting the child unfold. Alongside this there must be an openness to the individuality of the child, leaving space for the conversation between the teacher and the guiding spirit of the child.

I would like to present an experience I had with one student whom I was fortunate to teach in my second year at the school. It is included as one kind of example of a ‘destiny conversation’ which sometimes a teacher is blessed with — even a new one.

Mark was a very intelligent child, happy and healthy, who transferred to our school in 6th grade. He had wonderful parents and was full of life and intelligence. He had been educated by one of the most well known Waldorf teachers. However, he was not reading.

How was I to approach this perplexing situation? While contemplating this, and praying too, I came upon a story about Nellie Bly, a very famous American woman, who, at the turn of the last century, had a desire to be a reporter. She feigned insanity in order to get committed to a mental institution so she could expose its inhumane conditions. This was a very dangerous venture, but she was successful. Her report changed the life of the inmates and she got her job. I told the story to the children who were very enthused about it, and we struggled through reading it. Then came the exciting part — the field trips! We took notebooks in hand and went on interviews just like real reporters. When we returned to class we wrote about them and continued our work on phonics and decoding. During this process, Mark began reading. He went on to have a brilliant career as a student and is now a successful young adult, which was not such a surprise, given his background and gifts. However, what is interesting is that, among other things, he did some wonderful thought provoking documentaries about important projects and concerns.

I cannot help but feel that he came to earth with strong intentions that included awakening other people to issues of our time, and that this desire was communicated to me, although it only reached me on a subconscious level. Then I was able to pick something that would be of interest to him and that would help him navigate through the stumbling blocks to reading.

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