

Preparing Children for the Knowledge of Their Native Land

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Although knowledge of their surroundings in its common sense is not given to children until third grade, it is a subject which can be prepared in the first grade of a Rudolf Steiner School, and to my mind it is one of the most fascinating and comprehensive. It seems to include the teaching of everything not specifically mentioned otherwise. In talking with other teachers, I have often had the impression that they did not know how to approach it. Now fools rush in where wise men fear to tread, and I feel I should state that this article contains my own thoughts on the subject and a description of my own attempts to present it, based of course on such indications of Rudolf Steiner's as are available.

We are told in the curriculum for the third grade that the object of this teaching is to awaken the dreaming child to a consciousness of his environment. At the age of six or seven, however, he is still a part of his environment; he does not yet stand objectively towards the outer world. In world history also there was a time when man was not aware of himself so strongly as a conscious individuality. He felt "the same thing that makes the sun rise and the winds blow moves my arms and feet." Similarly the child is still "carried," as it were, by a power outside of himself. This enters him gradually—we speak of "taking possession of oneself." Education furthers this process, and it is the task of the educator to help the child to connect himself more consciously with his surroundings.

How does the teacher set about this task? In the first place he must attain some clarity as to the state of the child's mind at this stage. It is too easy to think of the child as a small-sized edition of the adult and to adjust our arrangements accordingly. It is an extraordinarily difficult thing for an adult to try to put himself in the place of the child. Certain symptoms are, however, clear.

It is a generally accepted tenet in teaching that one should begin with the known and proceed to the unknown. The question we must first of all answer, however, is, "What *is* known to the young child?"

Life is a gradual incarnation. From regions far away the soul descends to earth and takes on a physical body. For the first few years of his life it is obvious that a child is not master of himself. The baby sleeps most of the time, or, to express it in another way, spends most of the time in its spiritual home. It is dependent on the adult for everything. For the first few months it has even to receive its earthly food via another body. The eyes do not fix objects. Only gradually do the faculties of consciousness develop. Seeing, hearing, walking, speaking—all show that the spirit is assuming greater mastery of the body.

At six or seven the child comes to school and his formal education begins. What is his state of mind? One look into the eyes of the children of a first grade on their first day at school can be very revealing. It is not so very long ago that they left the spiritual world, and every teacher must feel—to use a hackneyed but expressive phrase—that he must “let them down lightly.” Many things are familiar to them that grownups no longer understand, as, for instance, the working of the fairies. Everything lives for the child. Toys, pets, dolls, dogs, cats—all speak and converse with one another. Even in the lifeless, the child experiences the living. Whereas the adult kills life in order to know, the children experience life in what is apparently dead.

In drawing and painting, while children of six or seven years can produce very beautiful pictures, one sees that they have no sense of perspective or accuracy. In illustrating a fable the frog may be quite as big as the bull, and neither of them will have much resemblance to the original. Only at the age of nine or ten does the child begin to be really conscious of his immediate surroundings in the ordinarily accepted sense. Our curriculum is so arranged to meet this changing need.

Obviously the young child has no use for scientific data or abstract descriptions. Anything taught under the heading “Knowledge of One’s Native Land” must be presented in an imaginative way, as if the mountains and trees and flowers were speaking with one another. In this way, true scientific fact can be given but in story form; and later on in school life, when this subject has been transformed into geography, geology, botany, zoology and kindred subjects, reference can be made to these stories which had made a deep impression on the child’s mind and which, in the meantime, have undergone some form of digestion.

Where then do we begin? What method do we use? A comprehensive answer can be given to the first question: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” The answer to the

second is that all knowledge must be presented in living pictures. The teacher may well scratch his head in perplexity at the magnitude of his task.

For a whole term I made this subject our chief interest in Grade 1 (ages six and seven). It provided material for writing practice, recitation, arithmetic, crayoning and painting. To some extent I was also able to carry the same theme into the German, French and eurythmy lessons. The general plan was to give the idea of a divinely created world, then to present certain aspects of that world to the human inhabitants who had descended to it from other spheres.

In all our teaching we try to give the children a living conception of the world, a world not put and held together by a series of mechanical laws but one which is divinely inspired: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." It is as yet too early to tell the actual Bible stories, but my first story was based on this fundamental idea. It was concerned with the activity of angels and their servants, the gnomes and fairies. It described how, through their combined workings, the trees, flowers, and birds came to live in the world, how the sun and moon and stars first made their appearance. Into this created world, some children also came to live, and their path of descent was described in another story. "Our birth is but a sleeping and a forgetting" was the theme, and the story ran briefly as follows:

Once upon a time there were some children who lived in a golden castle on a high mountain. They used to stand on the walls, and from there they could see into far-distant countries. One day a boy and a girl, who were standing together, thought that they recognized some of their friends in one of those far-off lands, and a great longing overtook them to go there. They went to the ruler of the golden castle and asked if they might leave for a while to visit this distant land. The ruler gave them his blessing and instructions for the journey. They had to leave by one of the twelve gates of the castle—the choice was important—pass through the hall of the Seven Queens, cross a wide lake, and then penetrate a forest which would become thicker and thicker until an apparently impassable gate was reached. Beyond that lay the land they sought.

Then I described the boy's and the girl's adventures separately, the gates they chose, the gifts they received from the gatekeepers and the queens. When they arrived at the end of the forest paths, they had to burst a way through the gates and, in the effort, they lost consciousness. When they awoke, they had forgotten everything, although in due course, they met and recognized one another. They now found themselves in the world that I had previously

described. They discovered all sorts of wonderful things, and these became the themes for my subsequent stories.

Having now given the idea of the world as a whole, divinely created, and having situated the children into it with the proper background, it seemed justifiable to proceed to various details, although always in a wide aspect. During the following weeks, we had as themes—one week, one theme—the seasons, winds, clouds, elementals, flowers, vegetables, trees, insects, birds, fishes, and animals. They were all dealt with in story form, and in this way we had a little introduction to the manifold manifestations of nature.

Every week we learned a new poem that had some relevance to the subject in hand. For instance, in dealing with clouds, we learned part of Shelley's poem:

“I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers from the seas and streams...”

A story was told of how one day the wind was sporting with the clouds wherein dwelt the water fairies. On towards the mountains the wind drove them, and the mountain, who loved the clouds, told the water fairies that they were badly needed down on the earth. So the water fairies came down, each riding on a raindrop, and all earth's creatures—plants, animals and men—rejoiced to see them. The raindrops sweetened the whole earth and then began to meet up again in twos and threes, then in little groups. To the eyes of the humans they appeared as little trickles of water, then rivulets, and, as more and more came together, as streams and mighty rivers which poured themselves into the sea. Over the sea the sunbeams were dancing. Some of the water fairies joined hands with the sunbeams and—swish!—away they flew right up into the sky. Soon there appeared a whole crowd of them together, and the humans looking up said, “Clouds are gathering again.”

With great enthusiasm we painted and crayoned pictures by way of illustration. I was greatly tempted to add Goethe's poem:

“The soul of Man Resembleth water...”

but decided that this would better fit in at a later time. In this story we obviously laid a foundation for an understanding of the cycle of rain, which can later be given as scientific fact.

Another theme was one that dealt with some of the activities of the elemental beings. The week's work began with this:

Busy gnomes
Bring to birth
Little seeds
In the earth.

Watersprites
Feed the shoots
Striving upwards
From the roots.

Airy sylphs
Power bestow,
Help the plant
To thrive and grow.

Sunsprites bring
Warming gold.
Rainbow-hued
Buds unfold.

Flowers all
Secrets keep.
In their hearts
New seeds sleep.

Water, fire,
Earth and air
In their growth

Have a share
That a seed
A seed may bear.

Having learned this by heart, the children wrote it out in their writing-cum-drawing books. Then they added several illustrations with colored crayons. This was the story:

Once upon a time there was great excitement among the gnomes who dwelt in a certain garden. They were whispering and consulting together over a large brown seed that the wind had left for them. They had never seen one like it before, and they were terribly anxious that it should receive the proper care. They were also terribly proud to have it given into their charge.

It was autumn time and the leaves were all falling. The trees were busy storing up in their roots all the golden sunshine that they had collected during the summer. The flowers were saying goodbye to one another until the next spring. Some of the birds were bidding farewell to the trees that had provided them with homes during the summer, and the trees were wishing them a safe journey.

Already it was rumored that Old Man Winter, with his two helpers Jack Frost and North Wind, had set out from their home at the North Pole and were on their way south.

So the gnomes set to work and prepared a cozy little bed for the seed under the soil, and there they tucked it in where neither Jack Frost nor North Wind could reach it, and there the seed went peacefully to sleep, carefully watched over by the little gnomes.

When the spring came (previously described in story form and graphically), it was time for the seed to wake up. The gnomes knew that this had to be done very carefully, because if a seed is not awakened properly, it dies. So the gnomes sent for some of their cousins, the warmth and the water fairies. The water fairies guided some raindrops down into the soil and the warmth fairies kept guard just above. Sure enough, after a few days, the seed awoke—and sent a little shoot upwards above the level of the soil. As soon as the light fairies saw it, they greeted it with great joy and gave it a beautiful green dress.

Soon Spring spread her wings and flew away and Summer took her place. The gnomes worked hard all the time to see that the roots could grow; the water fairies brought rain and dew-drops; the light and the warmth fairies each gave their gifts. The plant had by now a thick green

stalk; leaves which became finer and finer towards the top; a firm root. It was as tall or even taller than your teacher, and at the top was a little cluster of green leaves.

Then one day a great celebration was arranged. The light fairies formed a circle, and they danced a magic dance around the head of the plant. As they danced, gradually the green leaves folded back and a beautiful, big, golden yellow flower appeared. It shone like the sun, and the children walking through the garden stopped to look at it in wonder. As they watched, they saw it slowly turned its head to follow the path of the sun. Then they looked up into its broad, friendly, golden yellow face and said, "This flower love the sun and it is like the sun. Let us call it Sunflower."

We talked, of course, about other flowers as well. In our painting lesson, we painted a flower, letting it grow out of the earth and upwards to its blossom, with all the elemental beings attendant on it. Having lived intensely in the story, it was possible to repeat it to the children in a foreign language without losing their interest. The eurythmy lesson was also planned around the same material.

I think it is obvious that a lot of material can be covered in this way and that a lot of preparation can be done which will bear fruit later. Apart from stimulating the imaginative faculty of the child, we have introduced various aspects of the external world in a manner that can be easily received. The child's consciousness is increased, his interest awakened, true facts have been given which can form a basis for later intensive study. At a more advanced stage one will present these themes in a different manner. Thus the child does not retain a rigid concept but develops living thinking.