

OUTDOOR LEARNING IN STEINER WALDORF SCHOOLS

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Since 1919, Steiner schools have developed across the globe and outdoor learning is one of their fundamental principles and education tools. Here, Simon explains more about the Steiner process in relation to outdoor experiences, which can be adapted for any school setting.

I have to admit that I am a very fortunate teacher! My main responsibilities are teaching gardening and woodland management to 11–14 year-olds, and my school is in the incredibly lucky situation of having an estate of 69 acres of heritage parkland. I am deeply aware of being in a very privileged situation, and the responsibilities it brings in using the parkland for the best educational purposes. However, practical and outdoor

learning are essential features of any Steiner Waldorf school and are integrated and integral parts of pupils' education – whether one has a large park or a small city school. I shall briefly outline why this is so.

The first school inspired by Rudolf Steiner opened in Stuttgart in 1919 (Steiner, 1996). In the intensive training given to the teachers before the opening of the school, Steiner outlined a comprehensive view of child development which sought to integrate the physical, psychological and spiritual (Rudolph Steiner quoted in Rawson *et al.*, 2003). This underpins both the teaching methods and the curriculum, which are cultural processes that seek to support child development by providing age-appropriate learning challenges and tasks.

This picture has clear stages, requiring different educational methods. For example, in Early Years settings, the pupil's willingness to imitate the adults in their activity and play is the key learning mode.

There is no formal tuition before a child enters the school in their seventh year. Once in school, the ideal is to have a class teacher who accompanies the pupils through all eight years before they progress into the Upper School. In these years, 7 to 14, there are changes in approach annually – and especially at 8–9 years and again at 11–12 years – but the teacher's over-riding aim is to present learning artistically, to work on the feeling life of the pupil, to establish the experience that the world is beautiful (Rawson and Avison, 2013). With pupils above the age of 14, the awakening of thinking becomes the main task of the teacher, although Steiner (1996) repeatedly reminds teachers to relate everything to practical life.

There are two important points to note, however. The first is a shift in dominant learning mode from the physical and active in the Early Years, through feeling in the Lower School to thinking in the Upper School: one might put it as hand, heart and head. The second

is to understand that the curriculum is descriptive – rather than prescriptive – so the process of learning is at least as important as the content. Teachers are required to make decisions about both these aspects of learning, based on their assessment of the needs of the pupils in front of them. This is not to suggest that skills are neglected, and even in 1919, Steiner was at great pains to assure the authorities that pupils would be at a level equivalent to that in state schools in most year groups. Rather, it is to emphasise that the curriculum needs to be a living, flexible cultural document, capable of adapting itself to human development.

Active learning in the Early Years naturally has a strong connection with the outdoors, and indeed Steiner schools in Europe have been prominent in pioneering ‘forest’ kindergartens, where pupils are outside in nature for almost the entire day. Outdoors play, then, is essential in Early Years settings, and walks on which pupils can collect seasonal treasures are important because these experiences can be combined with stories, activities and movement to create a rhythmical experience of the year. In some situations it is possible to take these experiences further. For example, by having an outdoor bread oven, baking can be taken to a different experiential level for the pupils. Wood needs to be collected, stacked and dried and fires have to be made! At snack time, apples from a local tree can be pureed, or made into apple juice or apple rings – and where pupils are able to help collect the apples, so much the better. Leaves can be swept for compost, bulbs and plants can be grown in pots – there is always something to do in a garden! These processes not only contribute to understanding the rhythm of the seasons, they also create meaningful bodily activity and movement.

Moving on to the Lower and Middle School, I need to introduce another important feature of the Steiner Waldorf approach, which is the main lesson. For the first two hours of the day over a period of 3 to 4 weeks, the class teacher works with the pupils on a specific theme or subject. The subject is elaborated not only through writing and stories, but may also include singing, painting, drawing, drama and craft work. This format allows the teacher to develop a rich and multi-faceted experience and to integrate many aspects of learning, which include practical and outdoor activities.

If we briefly trace the Steiner Waldorf approach to geography in our school, we can say it is present in the Early Years and the first couple of classes in their walks and encounters with trees, rivers and plants. Class 3 (8 to 9-year-olds) enjoy a major theme of farming, which many schools can develop extensively by growing

food crops in the school garden and may include making compost. In addition, pupils often plough the land, hitched up to an old horse plough!

At 9 to 10 years, ‘Local Geography’ makes its appearance as a main lesson subject. At our school, we use this opportunity to take a series of walks to get to know our village, the nearby town, local stream and woods, and we make maps based on our experiences. The work leads us to make charcoal and carry out a little blacksmithing because these activities were formative influences in our area of Sussex. Some classes complete the year by walking 60km to the sea over a period of three days. The pupils stay in hostels, cross different landscapes and see different types of soils and settlements. In subsequent years, the subject progressively expands into British, European and world geography. The emphasis on first ‘doing’ the subject lays a strong experiential base for each pupil, builds team work, and is a good preparation for a more conceptual approach as they progress through the school.

Gardening is another example (Heckmann, 1998; Kaiser, 2013). Steiner suggested that pupils should do gardening, and in the original preparation courses for teachers – which were written in 1920 – a surprisingly large amount of time was devoted to how to teach nature study. Again, this thread is woven into the Early Years and is present in each year in school, reaching a culmination with main lessons on botany in class 5 (10 to 11-year-olds). Gardening then appears as a specialist subject, usually in class 6, offering the pupils the chance to work practically with all that they have learned and experienced previously.

It would require a much longer article to look at all the possibilities there are for bringing outdoor learning into the main lesson format. The article would have to cover making a lime kiln in chemistry, mechanics experiments, creative writing and poetry, land art, and much more. An exciting area of development in recent years at our school is ‘bush craft’. Making fires and shelters, and carrying out arts or crafts outdoors directly using natural materials are just components of several main lessons or local class trips. Such activities build pupils’ powers of observation, offer them a new way of looking at natural surroundings, and develop pupils’ manual and artistic skills and perhaps, above all, build their resilience – an ability that many of today’s children lack.

The resurgence in interest in the outdoors as a key educational tool is apparent in the diverse areas of research, and well presented in Richard Louv’s influential books (see Louv, 2005; 2012). At Steiner schools we have the

opportunity to do this as part of our frontline educational provision – not through yet more information overload and head-orientated lessons, but through going outside with our pupils, getting our hands dirty, making things, growing plants, and generally doing stuff. It’s great fun too! The pupils’ physical and practical engagement in learning adds a major component, which can in turn transform their understanding back in the classroom. Understanding the world we live in – rather than just knowing about it – is a diverse process of learning, which involves pupils in developing a relationship with the content and integrating their own personal experiences.

I suggest this approach is relevant to our times, and is why Steiner considered practical work to be essential for healthy human development. After all, what could be more natural?

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