Reaching Across The Ages

The winter sunlight reaches gently across my desk and lights up a pathway to a copy of my Waldorf Class Teacher Training final project. It has a blue cover with images of a spiral, a compass, an egg cupped by two hands and an outstretched arm reaching to another to secure a safe crossing. They represent to me the intrinsic qualities and elements of Waldorf Education for teacher and student alike. The egg, a seed of potential—to be held, warmed and in time allowed to break free; the spiral, unfurling fingers imbued with an inner knowing of the past and fostering new pathways towards the future; the compass—for direction, guidance and trust; and the outstretched arm of safe crossing—at once looking back and reaching out to move forward.

My project is entitled ‘Reaching Across the Ages’. It is a story of a classroom evolving over the centuries of time. It is a story very much of the present, yet equally of remembering the past and of contemplating the future, a future that is faced by primary schools throughout the world, a future that embraces teaching in combined classes.

In the not too distant past, classrooms in the UK looked a good deal different from their present day configuration. Many of our parents and grandparents still hold vivid memories of their junior schooling days. Memories of wood stoves, slates to write on, kindly plump lady teachers (if you were lucky!) and a penny for an iced bun with your morning milk. Memories of the often one room, perhaps two teacher school where all the children of the locality would come together and be taught in a single group of combined classes, from the kindergarten years through to their departure into secondary school.

One-room schoolhouses were commonplace throughout the town lands and villages of Tom Sawyer and Laura Ingles Wilder’s rural 19th century America. The sometimes beacon red buildings that dotted the crossroads and river-ways of Canada, Australia and New Zealand also housed a similar will to educate. These schools were established by pioneer families wishing to equip their children with basic Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (The 3 Rs’), and if they, that is to say the children, were lucky, these ‘basics’ would be supplemented with a healthy dose of the tales of individuals like the legendary Mr Peter Stewart Ney. Mr Ney, known affectionately as “bravest of the brave next to Napoleon”, was a French Empire military Marshall who had been captured after the defeat of the famous Emperor. Having been tried for treason and sentenced to death by firing squad, he miraculously escaped only to turn up teaching, much to the delight of the children, at the Five Forks School in North Carolina. Such brave adventures and marvellous enchantments he had to offer captivated the minds and fired the imaginations of many a child within his class!

Of course, the tradition of combined classes is much older. Long before Mr Ney, the infamous Penal Laws passed by the English in Ireland (1702-1719) were designed to suppress and eradicate the Catholic Faith; this included prohibiting Roman Catholic education which led to a thriving industry in ‘bootleg’ schools. These were not even one-roomed but ‘Hedge’ schools! Schooling that was

1 Your 1950’s School Life, Ms Hilary Petherbridge, Leyland, Lancashire, England
2 Preliminary History of Stanley Schools by Alfred Rhyne and Joyce Handsel
conducted in secret by elusive characters who were the remnant poets, scribes and Brehons (the judges who administered ancient native law) of the fallen Gaelic aristocracy after the Flight of the Earls (defeated at the battle of Kinsale in 1601) had marked the Irish historic landscape forever.

From the backs of barns, the corners of cow sheds and the hedge rows of Ireland one could hear the lilt of these Hedge Masters midst tales of Ovid, Homer (Roman and Greek poets), the Fianna (warrior bands) and Cuchulain (a great hero of Irish legend) or even the more recent – for those times – French Revolution. Tales and encounters that were “not read as they are usually read by Learners”, said William Carleton (an Irish Novelist educated in a hedge school 1830), not read for their Grammatical merits, but as histories animated by music, myth, poetry and song, where from stemmed the possibility of a different way of looking into the future. Hedge schools held dear to their hearts the vision that no matter the trials and tribulations of day-to-day living, poetry and imagination were freely available to all.

And yet, the 18th & 19th century tide of industrialization began to wash ashore ideals which espoused virtues of discipline, temperance and structure in both monetary and social order, ideals which could not be gleaned from the apparent chaos that seemed, to the mercantile mind to rule within a Hedge school.

In the play Translations, written by Brian Friel in 1980 and set in a small village in the heart of 19th century agricultural Ireland, we find the hedge master sitting amid of a plethora of children of various ages, some reciting the opening lines of Virgil’s epic poem Aeneid, others playing with objects on the ground and others again helping their neighbors to read, was a scene of liberty, fraternity and equality.

Perhaps these aspirations or notions were not considered fitting for the lower classes of society, for in many ways the educational content of schooling that was to follow endeavored to manage and maintain the ‘ageless tradition of regularity and order amongst the classes’, a time and a place of everything, and everything in its proper time and place. Even as the liberal philosophies of Rousseau (1712-1778) and Paine (1737-1809) regarding holistic development of heart and spirit were filtering into the reckoning of the English government, it remained most important to educate children to be moral, willing and loyal subjects.

Just as ‘mass production’, ‘homogenous output’ and ‘division of labour’ were dominant aspects of factory life at that time, so too were there echoes of this in the newly established schools. They were no longer one-room or one teacher but consolidations of small local schools. Demographic movement to urban areas led to multiple classroom schools where classes could be held separately for various grade levels teaching a pre-determined curriculum delivered according to the politically fashionable themes of the day.

Still all was not lost. Like the families ‘out west’ on the prairies and the Hedge masters of Penal Times Ireland, the pioneering spirit remained lit. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, a most vehement critic of the state educational system,

“...there are always somewhere two or three teachers...whose specific genius for their occupation triumphs over our tyrannous system and even finds in it its opportunity.”

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3 Treatise on Parents and Children by G B Shaw
It was at this very time that Rudolf Steiner, arguably one of the most inspired educationalists of that era, worked to develop an educational model that would ‘triumph over a tyrannous system’ and replace political themes with the needs of the developing child as the impetus for the curriculum.

Faced with a challenging political, social and economic environment after the First World War, Steiner engaged the people and world around him. He took on board the thoughts, desires and demands made when establishing a school independent of the state. He clearly listened to life, digested what he met and worked creatively with this to further his belief that the best interests of the developing child must rest at the centre of any educational program. And so, in 1919, was born the Waldorf Astoria School in a Cigarette Factory in Stuttgart. It was a school created at the request of the Factory owner, Emil Molt, to educate the children of the factory workers.

Like the Fianna Warriors, with strength and courage, people inspired by Steiner have propagated the seed planted in that Waldorf Astoria Factory and over the many following years established new schools from New York to New Zealand, Austria to Africa, until today there are more than 800 Steiner Waldorf Schools around the world.

Not all Waldorf schools today are of the size and scale of the Waldorf Astoria School, which, by 1926, had upward of 1000 students! In fact, two thirds of Waldorf schools in the UK & Ireland have less than 120 pupils. Many of these schools have had to make ‘ingratiating compromises’, as Steiner called his curriculum adjustments, simply to be able to have a school at all. And one of the most significant of these is the employment of a combined class teaching strategy.

A combined or composite class is defined as two consecutive primary class groups brought together and taught by one teacher, usually out of demographic necessity. A combined class teacher will inevitably employ to a greater extent differentiation techniques in both instruction and assessment, grouping strategies and the support of the children as independent learners. They may also, as recommended by Connell (1987) integrate curriculum around a theme or umbrella topic, under which children of different ages and stages can work together in a group as well as practicing skills at different levels.

Whilst the use of themes in this way is most convenient for a combined class delivering the National Curriculum (in the UK), in Waldorf education, themes such as the use of Aesop’s Fables with 7-8 year old children are chosen specifically to engage the power of their imagination to subtly support their growing awareness of contrasting human qualities and characteristics.

Rudolf Steiner’s model of education is one whose curriculum is intrinsically linked to the progression of child development. The curriculum has individual topics dedicated to particular class years with an aim of supporting the prevalent developmental phase of the children within that group.

For instance, the classes in a Waldorf school begin with Class I around the age of 6 and in Class 5 Waldorf children at the age of ten and eleven are immersed in a world of Geometry, of Ancient Civilizations, of the tales of Greek Gods and Odysseus, of botany and the observation of all things in this world. This is at a point in their lives where they experience a growing awareness of ‘self’ both individually and within a group. Their physical movements are co-ordinated, balanced and harmonious. Their inner movements will be enchanted, and deeply nourished with topics such as the Olympian ideals created in ancient Greece in which qualities such as beauty are as valued as
speed and distance. This is a pivotal point in development - it is a time where the Waldorf curriculum supports the child in making the transition from myth to history and from childhood to puberty.

On a personal level, my exploration of combined classes presented just as momentous a pivotal point. I couldn’t reconcile how one could even contemplate teaching two curricula concurrently which are so clearly devised to support specific developmental phases. How could one present this to a combined group of ages without having detrimental effects? And yet my own children were in combined classes in a Waldorf school and they did not seem to be suffering – anything but!

So my quest began... travelling through cyber space, trawling through educational references, and, of course engaging with current combined class teachers (in both Waldorf and State schools).

I discovered that combined classes are not just a ‘local phenomena’ or indeed an issue unique to Waldorf schools. Combined classes, or ‘multi-level’ or ‘multi-grade’ classes as they are variously termed, are prevalent in most primary educational systems right across the world.

As one can imagine, one-room schools, multi-level classes and single teacher schools are still very much a part of the local geography in developing countries, primarily due to economic, political and social constraints.

Small Schools, in themselves are prompting real debate in primary educational bodies across Europe and the States. Besides them being a reality of demographic configuration, the notable academic and social successes reported by small US schools are raising questions regarding teaching strategies employed by one-teacher schools and their ability of fostering intimacy and individual attention while nurturing independence and self-reliance of students.

More surprising, perhaps, is that evidence from recent European studies including the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland and Scotland which have found that up to 70% of primary schools engage in teaching combined classes. An older study in the UK revealed that 66% of schools in the north west of England operated some form of mixed age grouping.

In the US and Canada there exists a philosophical belief that children within groups of mixed ages and abilities turn out to be more socially balanced and more academically accomplished than their peers in single grade classes. This belief is underpinned by extensive studies across private and state educational bodies.

For example, in one of the most significant reviews combining statistical analysis of a number of studies of effects of composite classes, it was concluded that ‘non-graded organisation of

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4 The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum by M Rawson & T Richter
elementary education can have a positive effect on student achievement’ and at worst that there would be no detrimental impact on the children of multi-age classrooms.6

But education is not just about academic results. It is about imbuing the children and the facts & figures with qualities of wonder, reverence, respect, ‘doubt, intelligent debate and [a] burning desire for truth’ so that, to paraphrase Kavanagh7, we do not burden our children with stolen knowledge that they could not use.

Research, studies and anecdotal evidence that acknowledge these non-academic qualities of education show that multi-age grouping improved social skills and reduced discipline problems within a class (Allison & Ong, 1996). In turn, this growth in social and affective development - such as child-child and teacher-child interactions, problem solving, peer assistance and cooperation - has been directly associated with improvement in academic development.

Thus, contrary to what one might expect, research clearly shows that children in combined classes are not disadvantaged. In fact, many do better.

Stemming from these strong results, Canadians in Manitoba and Americans in Kentucky, Mississippi and Oregon have mandated what they refer to as Multilevel or Multi-age classes throughout primary education. These are, to all intents and purposes, the same as combined classes with the distinction that they are not a reaction to environmental factors but a deliberate action taken to develop an educational environment that these school authorities consider more beneficial to the development and growth of their children. Does this sound anything like a school at a cigarette factory in Stuttgart?

This deliberate choice and will to evolve or reform education has empowered Educational and Government Bodies in the States and Canada to put time and resources into developing Best Practices to cope with the inherent challenges that come with such classes.

Contemporary educationalists, Miller and Gaustad, said that combined classes were ‘more labour intensive, required more planning, collaboration and professional development than the conventional graded classroom’. With this in mind, the Minister of Education and Youth in Manitoba has produced a range of documents regarding the establishment of Multilevel Schools which outline the challenges, opportunities and possible pit-falls that may be encountered. They have described – and developed best practices to address – many obvious, and some less obvious, concerns that are relevant to and necessary for the development of a successful school. Taken together, these documents provide a valuable starting point for both parents and teachers wishing to establish a multi-level school.

Without a doubt, studies across the ‘to-combine-or-not-to-combine’ divide are conclusive that children can thrive in multi-level classes. But these were state schools – what about my children in a combined Waldorf class? Whilst I have not come across any writings of Steiner whereby he directly comes out against combined classes, the strength of the tradition of a single grade class leaves one wondering what would Steiner have done in the same situation?

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6 Veenman’s (1995b) – ‘no better, no worse’ All In Together? An overview of the literature on composite classes by Valerie Wilson University of Glasgow March 2003
7 Advent by Patrick J Kavanagh
From what I have read, Steiner was often insistent about the rigor of adhering to his curriculum indications. On one occasion he even mentioned that ‘Slovenliness’ had crept into the school and that teachers were taking the easy route to delivering his curricular indications!

But, Steiner also very much acknowledged that one must work between two significant pillars or poles: one of which concerned the child’s physical, mental and spiritual development, and the other which was the social and cultural background from which the children came.

Today, this includes the reality of small and pioneering schools having, at least initially, low student intake and the inevitable challenge of combined classes.

Sitting forefront in my mind throughout my research I had a vivid image of the Closing Words of Steiner’s ‘Discussions with Teachers’ wherein he expresses his wish to ‘lay upon [teachers] hearts the following four principles’...

“The teacher must be a person of initiative in everything done, great and small. The teacher should be one who is interested in the being of the whole world and of humanity. The teacher must be one who never compromises in the heart and mind with what is untrue. The teacher must never get stale or grow sour. Cherish a mood of soul that is fresh and healthy! No getting stale and sour! This must be the teacher’s endeavour.”

In the spirit of these words, some Waldorf teachers have developed and adopted a January to December curriculum plan. What this means is that rather than rolling out a curriculum over the usual school year i.e. Sept-Sept, which is how a single grade class works, a combined class teacher straddles two developmental phases by considering the school year from January to December.

For example, from September to December the teacher will focus their attention on the junior group of the combined class. The content for this period will be from the junior curriculum with accommodations made to challenge the senior group for whom this is revision. Then from January until July the teaching content will be from the senior groups’ curriculum, again with differentiation for the junior group who by this time will be that little bit older and more able.

Whilst this means that the lower year group are two terms ahead (in a three term year) and the higher year group are one term behind, it bridges the gap more satisfactorily between a child in, for instance Class 1 (6-7yrs) doing work that is a whole year ahead both academically and developmentally and the Class 2 child not having to repeat Class 1 work which does not fit them anymore.

This schedule respects Steiner’s pedagogical indications, upholds the importance of recall and recapitulation (a method by which lessons and learning is retained) and, as ever, endeavours to meet the developmental needs of the children with appropriate curriculum content. It also embraces differentiation techniques and the value of independent learning.

This Jan – Dec Curriculum plan works creatively with the Waldorf curriculum to meet the modern-day needs of class configurations, while not losing sight of the needs of the children. It enables a small school with combined classes to deliver the full 8 year cycle over a nine year period with only 4 teachers (not taking into account subject teachers). It ensures the possibility of each class maintaining the same teacher over this period and indeed from a very pragmatic economic point.
could possibly make small schools more financially viable and ultimately more accessible to the broader community.

Steiner never “intended [his work] to be final”, he said “life is full of complications and contradictions and any valid account of it must reflect this fact”...and this, for me is sufficient evidence that he would not have frowned upon the endeavours of combined class teachers and their use of such developments as the Jan-Dec Curriculum.

Let us do our own review and recapitulation: Let us remember back to where music, myth, poetry and song gave the possibility of a different way of looking into the future.

Let us remember the “many excellent ideas that came from one-room schools, such as students helping students, oral recitation ... working in teams not to mention the true community involvement of children of all ages.”

Let us acknowledge the wonderful contribution small schools with combined classes make at primary level.

Let us recognise the many advantages of small schools with combined classes: creativity that is not burdened by tradition, flexibility in decision making, problem solving and adopting new approaches. But most of all, small schools can provide a warm, social, secure and personal learning environment for our children.

Small schools with combined classes are the seeds for the future growth of Waldorf Education.

Andrew Gulliford, Historian and Director of the new Centre of Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis College in Colorado 1996