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## ***Learning to Think in Steiner- Waldorf Schools***

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### **Abstract**

The Steiner-Waldorf schools are well known for offering a curriculum infused with creative activities and for introducing cognitive education at a later stage compared to most other schools. There are 893 Steiner-Waldorf schools worldwide, including 29 in the UK (England 23, Scotland 4, N-Ireland 1, Wales 1), 121 in the USA, and 16 in Canada (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2005). Whereas there has been a growing concern with the teaching of thinking and thinking skills from the start of primary school, the curriculum in Waldorf schools is based on the development of the imagination through creative and artistic expression, which is thought to lead to healthy thinking later in life. Thus, what is learned at an early stage (e.g., to clap and speak a rhyme) is thought to work its way into thinking at a later stage of the child's life (e.g., to remember, participate, or count). This small study was designed to map out how, according to Waldorf teachers, thinking develops in their pupils.

**Key words:** thinking, creativity, Steiner, Waldorf, thinking skill, cognitive education

One of the main purposes of education is to teach pupils how to think. In England, thinking skills are part of the National Curriculum, whereas in Scotland, a forum on thinking skills was held not long ago to explore how they can best be taught in schools (Wilson, 2000). Broadly speaking, thinking skills interventions (or “programs”) can be grouped under three headings (McGuinness, 1999, p. 7): (a) general approaches, in which the intervention is specifically geared toward the development of thinking skills, which are thought to be generic, and is delivered as an addition to the existing curriculum (e.g., CoRT, Instrumental Enrichment); (b) subject-specific approaches, in which the intervention focuses on developing thinking skills through a particular curriculum subject (e.g., CASE); and (c) “infused” approaches, in which the intervention focuses on a generic set of pedagogical rules or principles, which are applied across the entire curriculum (e.g., Thinking Classrooms). There is an ongoing debate about which of these approaches (if any) is the best way to promote thinking skills (McGuinness, 1999, Wilson, 2000) and there is also a more fundamental, philosophical debate questioning the very existence of thinking “skills” and, as a logical consequence, the possibility of teaching such “skills” (Andrews, 1990; Bonnett, 1995; Gardner & Johnson, 1996; Higgins & Baumfield, 1998; Johnson & Gardner, 1999; Quinn, 1994). For the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to note that thinking skills approaches are targeted at both primary and secondary levels. However, where the approach is subject-specific, it tends to focus on secondary schools, whereas the generic and infused approaches apply across the entire age range.

Recently, a systematic review of research on the impact of thinking skills interventions on pupil's learning was carried out at the University of Newcastle (Thinking Skills Review Group, 2004). This group concluded cautiously that empirical findings point generally toward positive effects on learning of thinking skills approaches. One further suggestion was that "there may be a need for greater conceptual clarity between interventions focused on cognitive education and approaches that have a philosophical basis and that seek to develop dispositions and real-life problem-solving" (p. 43). This interesting comment draws a distinction between what might be called "purely" cognitive approaches and perhaps more holistic approaches, also characterising this contrast as one between psychology and philosophy (p. 9). Although philosophy-based programs, such as Lipman's Philosophy for Children, were clearly seen to be relevant to the review, of the 23 articles that met the criteria for inclusion in the in-depth review, just two focused on such philosophy-based programs (Fields, 1995, and Wegerif, 1996, as cited by Thinking Skills Review Group, 2004, p. 80 and p. 85, respectively). This is not surprising, as the criteria favored traditional experimental studies and thus were more likely to include studies located in a psychological paradigm, with a clear focus on particular skills and particular curriculum areas. Programs underpinned by a more holistic, philosophical approach tended not to focus on particular curriculum areas or the improvement of specific, relatively easy-to-measure cognitive skills, and their effect on pupil learning is therefore less straightforward to measure and possibly only noticeable after a longer time.

As a metaphor for the difference between these approaches, imagine throwing a pebble into a pond. The immediately observable effect is a splash. This is then followed by ripples on the water, which progressively extinguish. There are innumerable nonobservable effects, such as the slight rise in the water level, effects on plant and animals in the pond, and the effect on the thrower and on the relationship between the thrower and the pond, each with its own timescale. When researchers examine whether thinking skills programs have an impact on learning, they usually, for legitimate reasons, focus only on the immediate effects. However, children normally attend school for a minimum of 10 years of their life and it is generally recognized that this period covers in part the time that they are most susceptible to their environment. Their experiences of school are likely to have long-term effects, which they will carry with them through most of their adult lives, but these long-term effects are not easily observable. It is therefore not surprising that, as found in the review quoted above, education as a whole tends to focus more and more on the development of attributes that can be easily measured and on the development of educational interventions, such as thinking skills programs, for immediate impact. Perhaps the narrower the objectives of the intervention are, the more precise the effect of the intervention can be measured, but the more we lose sight of the whole development of the pupil. The result is a predominantly cognitive curriculum, dominated by very specific forms of knowledge, aimed to help pupils succeed on tests that test primarily for that same kind of knowledge.

The purpose of education is certainly to teach young people to think, but not to the exclusion of everything else. As Eisner (1996) puts it, "Our own rather parochial conception of intellect and narrow view of the skills children need typically lead to a rather meager educational agenda. It is an agenda that, in effect, limits what children can learn and that leaves fallow the fields in which their aptitudes might be cultivated." He then goes on to state at length that "there is one institution I know that does pay serious attention to the use of multiple aptitudes and the development of diverse forms of

knowing. I speak of Waldorf schools. . . . Waldorf education is based upon a view of human development that acknowledges the importance of the sensory system and the role of the body in learning. It attaches a special significance to the importance of myth and folk tale, and to eurythmy, a form of bodily movement designed to harmonize the various aspects of the child's experience. It emphasises the importance of image making in children's learning. Its teachers utilize rhythm and other sensory forms to help students understand ideas in arithmetic. In short, Waldorf schools . . . provide, or attempt to provide, a program that affords children a balanced educational diet, one that not only fosters conventional forms of academic achievement but puts a premium on the development of imagination and the refinement of the sensibilities" (p.83).

Furthermore, the first ever review of Steiner-Waldorf schools in England (Woods, Ashley, & Woods, 2005), which was published by the Department of Education and Skills at the end of June 2005, cautiously concluded that "the research studies reviewed give a cumulative sense of a positive relationship between Steiner schools and learning, achievement and pupils' educational and social development. There is evidence that Steiner school pupils score relatively well on mainstream tests, and that they do relatively well in terms of development of creative, social and other capabilities important in the holistic growth of the person" (p. 39).

The aim of the present study was to investigate specifically how the development of thinking is addressed in Steiner-Waldorf schools. I explore in some depth what is meant by thinking in the context of Steiner education and how thinking is thought to emerge in the developing human being. Then I draw on the responses to a small survey study to sketch a picture of how the development of thinking in Steiner pupils may be conceptualized and conclude by contrasting this with mainstream thinking skills interventions.

### **Freedom Through Thinking**

One of the primary aims of Steiner-Waldorf education is to prepare pupils to become free human beings (Steiner schools in Germany are called *freien Schulen*, or "free schools"), and in his *Philosophy of Freedom*, Rudolf Steiner sets out in detail what freedom entails. The freedom aspired to does not, of course, refer to freedom of choice, a kind of consumer freedom, but rather to a freedom of spirit "in all the welter of customs, legal codes, religious observances, and so forth" (Steiner, 1894/2000, p. 140). "Our life is made up of free and unfree actions. We cannot, however, think out the concept of man completely without coming upon the free spirit as the purest expression of human nature. Indeed, we are human in the true sense only in so far as we are free. This is an ideal, many will say. Doubtless; but it is an ideal which is a real element in us working its way to the surface of our nature" (pp.140-141). Note that I have consistently substituted "man" in the original translation with "human." Even though "man" was no doubt used to designate all human beings, I wish to ensure that it is clear that Steiner refers unequivocally to all human beings. The original German has "mensch," which literally translates as "person" or "human being"). This of course does not mean a disregard for "customs, legal codes, religious observance, and so forth" but, on the contrary, involves a high level of self-knowledge: "It is a moral advance when a human being no longer simply accepts the commands of an outer or inner authority as the motive of his action, but tries to understand the reason why a particular maxim of behaviour should act as a motive in her/him. This is the advance from morality based on authority to action out of

moral insight” (pp. 130-131). A discussion of freedom itself is outside the scope of this article, but Steiner explains with great clarity how understanding thinking is an absolute prerequisite for understanding human freedom. I summarize in the following the kind of thinking Steiner had in mind when speaking of freedom and, by consequence, of the kind of thinking he wished to nurture through Waldorf education. To ensure precise rendering, I have made extensive use of literal quotations, but within the limited space of this article it is impossible to provide a complete picture.

“The human being is not organised as a self-consistent unity. He/she always demands more than the world, of its own accord, gives him/her” (Steiner, 1894/2000, p. 13). Because of our very nature, we have numerous desires, including the special desire for knowledge, which we can only satisfy through our own activity. We’re always looking for the explanation of the facts that come to meet us. An exploration of thinking leads to the insight that it is through our thinking that we separate ourselves from nature in the first place, that we “confront the world as independent beings. The universe appears to us in two opposite parts: *I* and *World*, We erect this barrier between ourselves and the world as soon as consciousness first dawns in us. But we never cease to feel that, in spite of all, we belong to the world, that there is a connecting link between it and us, and that we are beings within, and not *without*, the universe” (p. 14). But it is also only through thinking (albeit of a different quality) that we can once more know and experience ourselves as part of nature: “Only when we have made the *world-content* into our *thought-content* do we again find the unity out of which we had separated ourselves” (p.14).

Thus, this kind of thinking does not try to bridge the apparent gap between us and nature, because this gap exists merely as a result of a particular kind of thinking. Instead, our thinking needs to be understood as part of nature, in the same way that, for example, trees, color and the wind are part of nature, with the notable difference that we can learn to control and steer our own thinking. This qualitatively different kind of thinking, which we can use to participate in rather than look at nature, gives rise to concepts that are real characteristics of the world around us, rather than logical abstractions. So it is through the development in ourselves of this kind of thinking “with nature” instead of “about nature” that we can become truly free: “It is quite arbitrary to regard the sum of what we experience of a thing through bare perception as a totality, whereas that which reveals itself through *thoughtful contemplation* is regarded as a mere accretion which has nothing to do with the thing itself” (p. 66). What Steiner expresses here points to a somewhat different conception of thinking than the one commonly used in education today. As indicated above, “thinking” in the educational context tends to be associated with cognitive functioning, perhaps even more particularly with logic and reasoning. However, thinking as Steiner describes it is an *experience*, not merely a cognitive activity, but an experience that we can direct.

With this notion of thinking in mind, I will now describe how, within and through Steiner education, it is thought to emerge in the course of the development of the human being.

### **Willing, Feeling and Thinking**

Steiner describes human development in stages of roughly 7 years and reference to these stages can be found in almost any text on Steiner Education (e.g., Aeppli, 2001, Childs, 1991, Ginsburg, 1982, Trostli, 1998). During the period from birth to approximately the 7th year, children lay the foundation for the rest of their lives by learning to walk, talk, and master the initial control over the physical body generally. In other words, this is the

period when the emphasis is on developing the will. It should, however, not be thought that all that is learned here are such “skills” as walking and talking. There is a sense in which the child is still asleep, even while awake, and much of what is learned at this stage enters the child directly as it were, without being mediated yet by either feeling or thinking. This does not mean that the child does not feel or think at all, but his/her strongest impulse is to learn through doing, through imitation. “Young children live in a world of deeds; to them play is work and work is play” (Trostli, 1998, p. xxii). During these first 7 years it is therefore thought to be crucial that the child’s environment is full of beauty and that there are worthy models the child can imitate.

During the second 7-year period, the child begins to “wake up” through the development of feeling. Feeling here refers not primarily to what are commonly called “the emotions” but to aesthetic feelings such as reverence, trust, and beauty. Therefore, in this period the child learns best if his/her feelings are aroused, such as through stories that paint colorful pictures and that work strongly on the imagination: “Thought in its proper form, as an inner life lived in abstract concepts, must still remain in the background during this period of childhood. It must develop of itself, as it were, without external influences, whereas life and the secrets of nature are being unfolded in parable and picture. Thus between the 7th year and puberty, thought must be growing, the faculty of judgment ripening, in and among the other experiences of the soul; so that after puberty is reached, young people may be able to form independently their own opinions about the things of life and knowledge. The less direct the influence is on the development of judgment in earlier years, and the more a good indirect influence is exercised through the development of the other faculties of the soul [i.e., willing and feeling], the better it is for all of later life” (Steiner, 1907/1989).

Only in the third 7-year period does the child fully wake up through the emergence of his/her faculty of thinking. It is therefore only from the age of 14/15 that the Steiner curriculum addresses the kind of scientific thinking, logical reasoning and critical judgment that are the focus of most thinking skills interventions. Of course thinking develops all through these 21 years, but the development of will and feeling are thought to be fundamental to the development of healthy thinking, as all three are closely interwoven, as indicated in the quote above. Although the Steiner approach is in this, and several other ways, distinctive from the mainstream, there are also many areas of overlap and similarity between Steiner and the mainstream, and this is explored in detail in the recent review of Steiner schools in England (Woods et al., 2005).

## **Method**

The central question of this project was “How do willing and feeling develop into thinking in Steiner schools?” A survey was sent out to all four Steiner Schools in Scotland, with a request to distribute these to teachers. There was a very low response rate (about 9% after two blank responses were omitted), which was not surprising, given that the most important questions on the form were open-ended and that the form was sent out not long before the summer holidays. This was not a funded project and therefore time was very limited. A follow-up was done with one school and a few more questionnaires were completed. It was notable that all respondents indicated that they were interested in being interviewed or observed in their lessons. One interview was conducted with a respondent who had not answered the most important question on the survey.

The responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed into a table to get an overview of the range of responses and respondents. There were responses from all levels, including nursery (one response; ages 3-4), kindergarten (two responses; ages 4-5), lower school (six responses; ages 6-14) and upper school (one response; ages 15-19) and from both class teachers and subject teachers. It should be noted that class teachers also often teach subjects. Respondents had varying numbers of years of experience of teaching in Steiner-Waldorf schools, from 1 to 24 years, with all but one having more than 4 years of experience. As there are only four Steiner schools in Scotland, it would be possible to identify individual teachers if further details were provided.

From the review already referred to (Woods et al., 2005), which covered 21 out of 23 schools in England and achieved a response rate of just under 50% (p. 4), it is evident that there was a considerable degree of uniformity across Steiner schools, particularly in terms of the pedagogical approach (pp. 66-86) and curriculum (pp. 45-59), although it must be noted that the main purpose of the review was to compare the Steiner schools to state-maintained schools rather than to each other. Nevertheless, this relative uniformity reduced the need for a large sample of responses.

As creative/artistic activities are “infused” throughout most of the Steiner curriculum, the question of how thinking develops was approached through an exploration of how teachers work with these activities to develop the will, feeling, and by extension, thinking. Besides background data, the three key questions on the survey were grouped under the heading “Creativity and Thinking” as follows:

1. Please describe three examples from your teaching that demonstrate how you have used creative/artistic activities with your pupils.
2. According to Steiner, development of the will and feeling are crucial to the development of thinking. Please give two examples of creative/artistic activities you have used in your teaching that you think were particularly effective at developing the will and feeling.
3. For one of the examples you gave above, how do you think willing and feeling transform into thinking?

## **Findings**

The responses to the three questions have been presented below, for each of the three 7-year phases.

### *Nursery/Kindergarten (Ages 3-6)*

*Please describe three examples from your teaching that demonstrate how you have used creative/artistic activities with your pupils.*

The teachers indicated a range of activities: creative play, baking, eurythmy (a form of movement particular to Steiner education), cooking, drawing, cleaning, painting, making lanterns, making small animals or figures from “nature’s treasures,” story telling. No mention was made of subjects, reading, writing or number work, but the activities were all primarily about doing something, even if it was just listening to a story. Furthermore, what might commonly be thought of as regular household tasks, such as cooking,

cleaning, and baking, were seen to be creative. There is no indication that these activities were engaged in for anything other than themselves. In other words, a story was told so that the children could listen to it rather than in order to teach them about important events in history. Similarly, baking was done in order to have bread to eat rather than to teach the children about how bread was made or about weighing and measuring.

*Please give two examples of creative/artistic activities you have used in your teaching that you think were particularly effective at developing the will and feeling.*

One teacher gave felting balls as an example of an activity for will development, whereas painting and story time were thought to develop feeling. A second teacher indicated that the kindergarten was concerned only with the “will forces,” but gave as an example kneading and shaping dough, “which is then baked and eaten for snack,” an activity that surely involves both feeling and will, as confirmed by the third teacher, who wrote “shaking an apple tree, gathering apples, washing them, chopping them, sieving them, eating apple puree - delicious!” This teacher’s second example was of gathering ripe wheat from the field and turning this into flour and then bread.

These activities may be seen to develop both will, and feeling, in the sense of enjoyment. Feeling, in the sense of beauty or aesthetics, is apparently not addressed directly; however, there is a strong sense of “goodness” in these activities because of their connection with nature and their usefulness. It is interesting that felting was seen to develop will, whereas painting was seen to develop feeling. This can perhaps be understood by realizing that felting is quite a laborious process, requiring considerable perseverance and consistency, whereas painting as an activity is relatively light work, but probably more demanding in terms of expression (feeling). From these examples, it seems that what the teachers perceive to be particularly effective in developing will and feeling are “whole” activities, in which the children are actively engaged in the entire sequence of “work” and able to experience their own impact on the world around them, be it through working on “nature’s treasures” or “working” with other children and adults in play.

*For one of the examples you gave above, how do you think willing and feeling transform into thinking?*

One teacher responded by confirming that she thought willing and feeling through play transform into thinking: “How do I build this so it does not fall over?” and “Dealing with feelings when things do fall over, when your friend does not do what you want her to do.” The second teacher wrote that developing thinking was not the purpose of the kindergarten (it should perhaps be noted that this teacher had just one year of experience). The third teacher used her earlier example of gathering ripe wheat from the field to process and then make into bread to explain how willing and feeling transform into thinking: “through eating and enjoying, children gradually “wake up” to the thinking each time they see [or] eat bread, cakes, biscuits, that they know where flour comes from and appreciate the work involved to process wheat (or apples etc.).”

The transformation to thinking is seen to happen through direct experience, through being and acting productively and imaginatively in the world, without there being a need to address thinking in the child directly, or devise activities that deal with specific skills or knowledge. There is a sense in which the young person is like a seed, with the developing

will like its growing roots, developing a firm hold on the earth and allowing it to draw water and nutrients from the soil.

### *Lower School (Ages 6-14)*

*Please describe three examples from your teaching that demonstrate how you have used creative/artistic activities with your pupils.*

The responses to this question included: a dance, a play and dominoes in math; developing writing, painting, drawing, and rhythmical activities in poetry, music and songs; story telling; drawing native trees; and making fences in gardening. Baking, cleaning, and cooking were not mentioned.

There was a range of activities here that were both very similar and yet quite distinct from those in the earlier years. Many of the creative activities were evident, but these were now more clearly centered around subjects, such a math, reading, writing, history, languages, gardening, and therefore, were more explicitly focused on learning. Although formal teaching starts in the lower school, there was a clear indication of teachers avoiding abstract concepts and working wherever possible with the children's imagination. For example, one teacher mentioned a game used in language: "I packed my bag to go on a trip and in it I put something beginning with a chosen consonant *sound* (not letter)." Another example is the development of spoken language and writing, before reading or "bringing aspects of history, geography, myths and legends "alive" through story telling, making use of creative word pictures so that children in listening can make their own inner pictures in their mind" (class teacher). And finally, having children make a drawing of a song or poem they have memorized, because "I am convinced that drawing something allows you to "digest" material in a different way - really on a deeper level, because children will remember their drawings better than anything else!" (foreign language teacher).

*Please give two examples of creative/artistic activities you have used in your teaching that you think were particularly effective at developing the will and feeling.*

Generally speaking, teachers responded that rhythmical and repetitive activities, such as form drawing, main lesson bookwork (writing) and eurythmy strengthen the will, and "if the material is rightly chosen the element of enjoyment and fun engages the feeling" (class teacher). Painting, working with color and listening to stories are thought to develop the feeling: "use of stories fitted to the child's age and development allows empathy and development of feeling as opposed to sentiment or sensationalism" (class teacher). One teacher wrote: "It is *not* a creative activity as such that develops the will and feeling in the child. One has to work on the *imagination* of the child to do this. You tell a story about the Scots Pine for instance that tells them about how the wood is used" (subject teacher).

Thus, both the will and feeling were addressed in the teaching; but compared to the earlier stage, there seemed to be less engagement in whole activities such as baking, cleaning, and cooking, and more emphasis on developing the will in the service of subject knowledge. At the same time, there seemed to be a stronger emphasis on addressing the feeling through stories of myths and legend and through painting. Finally, a crucial

element in the development of will and feeling (but especially feeling) was working with the child's imagination.

*For one of the examples you gave above, how do you think willing and feeling transform into thinking?*

One teacher responded that "This is purely an academic question as far as I work and plan the things I do with classes," and another indicated that "I don't think you can have straight cause and effect like that - that would be too easy. It does take years and a lot more than those given examples to see results - unfortunately. But I could imagine that being able to clap a clear and crisp rhythm gives the ability to think clearer." Others described how the activities themselves evolved over time to begin to engage thinking, or else how the will and feeling helped memory and helped to progressively "wake up" the consciousness toward thinking. For example, "The [math] dance progresses after a few weeks, to a circle game of catch, with the catcher answering the bond of the number spoken by the tosser. This helps to awaken consciousness out of the rhythmic song of the dance . . . commits it to memory (reflex)" (class teacher). Another example: "Doing actions with poetry - thus engaging the will - leads to knowing poetry by heart much faster" (class teacher). Finally, "Taking a history lesson as example: The narrative of events is given in a manner which should engage the feeling. This is later remembered ("recall") and written down in a descriptive or narrative way. The text is illustrated by the pupil which thus engages the will - not a quick sketch but a thoughtful expression of the events. By thus engaging the feeling *through* the will, the pupil develops thoughts of her own about the events - rights and wrongs, the alternatives, the social effect, etc." (class teacher).

Although it is evident that the question was sometimes interpreted as too abstract, asking for evidence of simple causal connections between will, feeling, and thinking, it became clear from most responses that it could be answered fruitfully. Thus teachers generally indicated that thinking did indeed develop through the development of will and feeling, illustrating with supporting examples how this happened. Again, there was a sense that the activities somehow contributed to a healthy development of thinking later. To continue the metaphor from the kindergarten examples: With the further development of the will the roots become stronger, whereas the development of feeling is like the growth of a stalk and leaves. Both roots and stalk are necessary prior stages to the flower, as will and feeling are prerequisites to healthy thinking.

#### *Upper School (Ages 15-19)*

Although there was only one response from an upper school teacher, this has been included, together with supplementary material from an interview with another subject teacher. To retain anonymity, as little reference as possible is made to the teachers' subject areas and the responses to the three questions are presented together (because the subject area is mentioned throughout the responses).

In the upper school, there was continued evidence of creative activities, but the emphasis shifted from developing will and feeling to developing thinking. So, for example, modern history was taught at the end of the lower school and the start of the upper school; however, in the lower school the emphasis was on the description of events (narrative, story, addressing the feeling), whereas in the upper school the focus was on the ideas that

lived at the time of those events. There was, at the same time, a continued emphasis on developing thinking through the engagement of will and feeling by employing artistic expression such as painting and modelling in connection with the curriculum subjects. Thus, in a sense, during the upper school years all the previous work came together in support of the development of thinking, which included, for example, evaluation (thinking) of the finished product and reflecting on its effectiveness (thinking and feeling), followed by further development work (will, feeling and thinking). To complete the metaphor: The plant now brings forth a bud, but the roots, stem, and leaves continue to grow. The flower would, of course, not have been able to emerge without the roots, stem, and leaves being there to support it.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

From the results of a survey returned by a small number of Steiner teachers in Scotland, it can be seen that there is a progression in pedagogic approach through the three 7-year phases of child development described by Steiner. Will develops during the first 7 years, feeling in the second, and thinking in the third. Furthermore, the development of will and feeling are seen to lead progressively to the development of thought. The way this is addressed by teachers, however, is primarily through a shift in emphasis, particularly in respect to willing and feeling. Whereas willing and feeling are both addressed throughout the three stages, there is a particular emphasis on willing in the early years and on feeling in the second period. When it comes to the development of thinking, there is a strong indication that this is not addressed directly until after puberty, in line with Steiner's descriptions (see earlier section on Willing, Feeling and Thinking). This was also found by Woods et al. (2005), who wrote that "the work of the older pupils is more focused on protracted periods of reasoning and thinking, whereas the younger pupils are led to learning through a fairly rapid progression of teacher initiated activities that draw heavily on the willing and feeling activities of singing, recitation and movement" (p. 82). This progression is strengthened further by the same topics being addressed differently at progressive stages of development, providing what Woods et al. refer to as the "spiral curriculum," after Jerome Bruner. This does not mean that thinking is not involved in the earlier stages at all, but rather, that it is left to "grow" or "ripen" in the background of the development of the will and feeling. When children sing songs, draw, paint, bake, count, and write they are naturally also thinking, but this is a kind of thinking that has not yet separated ("woken up") out of the totality of being and is, therefore, not yet conscious, or at least not to the same extent.

Thus, it is by carefully tuning education to the phases of child development as Steiner perceived them that thinking is developed in Steiner schools. As indicated in the earlier section on Freedom Through Thinking, a certain quality of thinking lies at the basis of freedom, and it is this quality of thinking that is thought to develop in Steiner education. It is a thinking imbued with life through feeling and willing, as indicated by the examples given by the teachers in this study.

Mainstream and Steiner education have a common purpose in teaching young people to think, but quite different approaches to achieving this. In mainstream education, this has led to the development of a predominantly cognitive curriculum and further thinking skills interventions to enhance it, whereas in Steiner education, where the ultimate goal for the individual is to become "free" through the development of thinking, there is a progressively shifting balance between willing (experience), feeling (the "affective

domain” and aesthetic sense) and thinking. There is a strong sense that we attempt in mainstream education to get young people to think by making them think, whereas in Steiner schools, up to puberty, thinking is trusted to develop in part through organic growth, encouraged by the development of will and feeling.

We might be tempted to develop a new thinking skills intervention program, based on Steiner education good practice, which would, among other things, discourage the teaching of thinking skills before puberty, delay reading and writing until age 6 and infuse the existing school curriculum with activities that speak to the child’s imagination and develop the will. No doubt such an intervention would be classified as a “philosophical approach” as it would be seen to “seek to develop dispositions and real-life problem-solving” (Eisner, 1996; Thinking Skills Review Group, 2004), rather than attempting to teach thinking to young people. No doubt it also would be difficult to assess its impact on pupils’ learning since, essentially, the perspective on child development and the development of thinking stretches far beyond the time span covered by most research studies. There might be some ripples on the surface of the pond, but the less obvious effects are likely to manifest only in the long term. Thus, a Steiner Thinking Skills intervention would probably be seen to fail. More importantly, we would be guilty of abstracting a handful of poignant features of Steiner education from what is essentially an organic whole, because “What seems likely is that what gives Steiner education its character is not a collection of techniques or its priorities but - as Armon (1997) describes it - the interaction of the different, fundamental features of school life” (Woods et al., 2005, p. 40). In other words, what “works” in Steiner schools only works because they are Steiner schools and not because they have implemented a range of techniques for teaching, and we should thus be on our guard against simplistic notions of what works in education, even though it might be tempting to extract aspects of good practice from one context to inform practice in a different context.

Having said that, it was not Steiner’s purpose to establish numerous Waldorf schools across the globe. Instead, he gave indications of an approach to teaching that could be adopted by teachers anywhere. In that sense, although we may learn much from examples of good practice, we might be better advised to familiarize ourselves with Steiner’s writings and attempt for ourselves to understand and apply them. Steiner was a great supporter of independent thinking and often stressed that no one should feel obliged to “take his word for it” provided a genuine attempt was made at understanding. To end with a quote from the website of the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School (2005): “Rudolf Steiner did not write or speak about Waldorf education, nor did he intend to found alternative schools. He spoke and wrote about how children learn and how teachers can teach them. If he is fundamentally correct about children’s development and education, his ideas regarding dolls, the ‘light of thought,’ and everything in between will find their way into schools everywhere. And if Waldorf schools represent Steiner’s method with open-hearted intelligence and skill, their work can model, lead and inform changes in education everywhere. Waldorf education is not an alternative form of education. It is education.”

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## **Résumé**

### ***Apprendre à penser dans les écoles “Steiner-Waldorf”***

Les 893 écoles de Steiner-Waldorf sont réparties dans le monde entier (29 se trouvent au Royaume Uni, 23 en Angleterre, 4 en Écosse, 1 en Irlande du Nord et 1 au Pays de Gales, 121 aux États-Unis et 16 au Canada) (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2005). Elles sont connues pour offrir un programme d'études basé sur des activités créatrices et pour introduire l'éducation cognitive plus tardivement que dans la plupart des autres écoles. Alors qu'il y a eu un intérêt croissant pour l'enseignement de la pensée et des compétences cognitives dès le début de l'école primaire, le programme d'études proposé par les écoles de Waldorf est basé sur le développement de l'imagination à travers l'expression créatrice et artistique, qui est considéré comme la base d'une pensée efficace dans la vie future. Ainsi, à un premier niveau on apprend à battre la mesure et parler en rimes, compétences qui sont sensées se retrouver plus tard dans la vie de l'enfant et aider au développement de sa pensée, dans sa capacité à mémoriser, participer en classe et compter. Cette petite étude tente de décrire comment, selon les professeurs de Waldorf, la pensée se développe chez leurs élèves.

## **Resumen**

### ***El aprendizaje para pensar en las escuelas Steiner-Waldorf***

Las escuelas Steiner-Waldorf, de las que hay 893 en el mundo (29 en el Reino Unido –23 en Inglaterra, 4 en Escocia, 1 en Irlanda del Norte y 1 en Gales- 121 en los Estados Unidos de América y 16 en Canadá) (Bun der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2005), son bien conocidas por ofrecer un currículum integrado de actividades creativas y por introducir la educación cognitiva en un rango mucho más alto que en la mayoría de las restantes escuelas. Durante el tiempo en que en la mayoría de las escuelas ha habido un amplio desarrollo de la enseñanza para pensar y de las habilidades de razonamiento desde los primeros cursos de la enseñanza primaria, en las escuelas Waldorf el currículum está basado en el desarrollo de la imaginación a través de la expresión creativa y artística, el cual es enseñado para lograr un pensamiento saludable a lo largo de la vida. Ello es enseñado desde los estadios más tempranos; por ejemplo: dar palmadas y hablar a un determinado ritmo es enseñado para trabajarlo como un medio a través del cual se mejora el pensamiento en un estadio posterior de la vida, o como una habilidad para recordar, participar o contar. Este pequeño estudio intenta planificar cómo, de acuerdo con los profesores Waldorf, se desarrolla el pensamiento en los alumnos.

## **Zusammenfassung**

### ***Denken lernen in Steiner-Waldorf-Schulen***

Die Steiner-Waldorf-Schulen, von denen es weltweit 893 gibt (29 in UK, davon 23 in England, 4 in Schottland, 1 in Nordirland, 1 in Wales, 121 in den USA und 16 in Canada) (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2005), sind bekannt dafür, dass sie ein mit kreativen Aktivitäten durchdrungenes Curriculum anbieten und kognitive Erziehung im Vergleich zu den meisten anderen Schulformen erst zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt einführen. Während es ein wachsendes Interesse an der Vermittlung von Denken und

Denkfertigkeiten von Beginn der Primärschule an gegeben hat, ist das Curriculum in Waldorf-Schulen auf die Entwicklung von Imagination durch kreative und künstlerische Ausdrucksgebung gegründet. Es wird angenommen, dass sie später im Leben zu gesundem Denken führen wird. Von dem, was zu einem frühen Stadium gelernt wird, z.B. Händeklatschen und einen Reim sprechen, wird somit angenommen, dass es sich auf das Denken in einem späteren Stadium im Leben des Kindes auswirkt, beispielsweise als eine Fähigkeit zu erinnern, partizipieren oder zählen. Die vorliegende kleine Studie versucht abzubilden, wie nach Auffassung von Waldorf-Lehrern sich das Denken bei ihren Schülern entwickelt.

### **Abstract Italiano**

#### ***Imparare a pensare nelle scuole Steiner-Waldorf***

Le scuole Steiner- Waldorf, 893 nel mondo di cui 29 nel Regno Unito – 23 in Inghilterra, 4 in Scozia, 1 nell'Irlanda del Nord, e 1 in Galles – 121 negli Stati Uniti e 16 in Canada (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2005), sono note per offrire un programma ricco di attività creative e per introdurre l'educazione cognitiva più tardi di quanto non faccia la maggior parte delle altre scuole. Pur mostrando una crescente attenzione per l'insegnamento del pensiero e delle abilità di pensiero fin dall'inizio della scuola primaria, nelle scuole Waldorf il curriculum è basato sullo sviluppo della fantasia attraverso l'espressione creativa e artistica, che si ritiene conduca a un pensiero sano in momenti successivi dell'esistenza. Quanto si apprende in una fase precoce, ad esempio, battere le mani o formare una rima, viene dunque elaborato sotto forma di pensiero più avanti nella vita del bambino, come capacità di ricordare, partecipare o contare. Questo piccolo studio cerca di rintracciare il modo in cui, secondo gli insegnanti delle scuole Waldorf, il pensiero si sviluppa nei loro allievi.