

# **The St Michael Steiner School**

## **The Early Years Curriculum Policy**

(Ages 0 - 7years)

From; "The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum". Sally Jenkinson. Edited by Martyn Rawson & Tobias Richter. Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship.

This overview should be read in conjunction with the Early Years EYFS policy.

### **The Kindergarten – 3 to 6 year olds**

Children enter the kindergarten between the ages of three and six. Parent and toddler groups are provided for younger children. Group sizes vary. Five morning sessions per week are offered, each session lasting for approximately four hours. Children take up provision according to age and need. An afternoon club is available if required for four afternoons a week. Increasingly providers are exploring the need for a wider early years provision with Waldorf nurseries and all day Kindergarten. A fine and flexible balance has to be maintained between parental needs and what is healthy for the young child.

### **General Principles**

Cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills are accorded equal value in the kindergarten and many different competencies are developed. Activities reflect the concerns, interests and developmental stages of the child and the carefully structured environment is designed to foster both personal and social learning.

Teaching is by example rather than by direct instruction and is integrated rather than subject-based. The curriculum is adapted to the child. In recognition of its vital role in early education, children are given time to play.

Emphasis is given to regular patterns of activities both within the day and over each week. A cyclical pattern is reflected in themes of work related to seasons of the year.

### **The Nature of Early Childhood**

Physical, emotional and cognitive development are subtly and inextricably linked. This view underpins and informs the early years curriculum, which is tailored to meet the child's changing needs during each phase.

At each developmental stage, the child presents a particular set of physical, emotional and intellectual characteristics, which require a particular (empathetic) educational response in return. This is the basis of a child-centered education. The formative period before the second dentition is seen as the period of greatest physical growth and development. Structures in the brain are being refined and elaborated, a process, which is not completed until after the change of teeth, and until that time the young child's primary mode of learning is through doing and experiencing - he or she 'thinks' with the entire physical being.

The nature of this early learning should be self-motivated, allowing the child to come to know the world in the way most appropriate to his or her age - through active feeling, touching, exploring and imitating, in other words, through doing. Only when new capabilities appear, at around the seventh year, is the child physically, emotionally and

intellectually ready for formal instruction. Through experiential, self-motivated physical activity the small child 'grasps' the world in order to understand it - an essential pre-requisite for the later activity of grasping the world through concepts. Children are encouraged to master physical skills before abstract intellectual ones.

### **Early Childhood Education - Aims and Objectives**

We provide opportunities for children to be active in meaningful imitation. To complement the maturational timetable we acknowledge imitation as the prime means of children's learning - hence adults in our kindergartens teach by imitation and most of what children learn at this stage is imparted by example. The child learns for life from life (the acquisition of the mother tongue for example, takes place largely through imitation) and children model their behavior on what happens around them. Adult activities stimulate direct responses in the young child and teachers carry out their daily tasks in such a way as to be worthy of imitation.

The Kindergarten is a community of "doers" and we support our community through our work, for example by baking our own bread. The children are welcome, but not required to help. The activity of the teacher and assistants may inspire the children to become independently active, finding their own learning situations in play. Children perceive and register everything the adults do - it isn't only what one does before the young child but also how one does it. Teachers are conscious of their own moral influence upon the child and of the development of good habits through imitation. We provide a range of suitable activities for imitation taking place in the kindergarten, domestic tasks such as baking, cooking, cleaning, caring for the room etc. - all activities with a social, practical, moral and educational basis, as well as artistic activity.

The forces of imitation, which are so important in helping the young child to know and understand the world in this first phase, naturally diminish and give way to a new kind of knowing which appears at around the time of second dentition. This is the time when teaching 'by example' moves into more formal teaching by instruction. The curriculum changes as one phase of child development comes to a close and another begins. (There is a similar shift in our curriculum at age 14, which corresponds to the changes which occur at puberty.)

### **Working with rhythm and repetition**

Steiner Waldorf kindergartens identify rhythm as an important educational principle. Children need the reassurance of continuity and regular events mark the kindergarten year, week and day. Seasonal activities celebrate the cycles of the year - autumn in kindergarten might be a time for threshing and grinding and Spring a time for planting. A 'seasonal area' in the room or wider environment reflects the changing natural world throughout the year, as do the themes of our songs, stories and poems. In addition, each week has its own regular rhythm of recurring activities i.e. baking day, painting day, and craft day.

Every day has its own smaller rhythms, which support the day's activities. These daily rhythms help the child to feel secure and to know what to expect, a tidy up song or poem, for example, signals the end of one activity and the beginning of another. The day is structured so that there is a varied pace - with periods of contraction and expansion -

providing a balance between times of activity and times of rest. In practice, this means that creative play is followed by a more concentrated circle or ring time, and energetic outdoor activity by a quiet story. There is a rhythmic alternation between the 'child's time' (creative play, outside time) and the teacher's time (ring-time, story), the teacher's time being comparatively short at this age. Working with rhythm helps children to live with change, to find their place in the world, and to begin to understand the past, present and future. It provides a very real foundation for the understanding of time - what has gone before and what will follow - and helps children to relate to the natural and the human world. Attention to rhythm promotes healthy development and leads to a balanced life later.

Repetition also plays a key role in establishing continuity and in the healthy development of memory. Children's memories are strengthened by recurring experiences and daily, weekly and yearly events in kindergarten are remembered and often eagerly anticipated a second time around. Stories are told not just once, but many times - repetition brings the opportunity for children to familiarise themselves with the material and to deepen their relationship to it.

### **Encouraging personal, social and moral development**

Children learn, through their creative play and through their daily social activities, to interact with each other. In kindergarten they learn to share, to work together, and to cooperate. They know and trust their teachers and are able to establish effective relationships with other children and adults. Teachers and children care for and respect each other.

We place much emphasis on caring for the environment - both inside and out. Wooden toys, for example, can be polished and mended, unlike their plastic counterparts. Where possible, gardening and composting activities introduce children to the idea of ecology and form an important part of the curriculum.

There are moments of reverence each day and teachers lovingly create opportunities for children to experience joy, awe and wonder. Kindness is practised by teachers and encouraged in the children. Festivals provide rich cultural and religious experiences for the child. Traditional fairy tales and nature stories address the feeling realm and gradually awaken a fine moral sense for knowing right from wrong. The teacher sets the example and has certain expectations of the children.

### **Providing an integrated learning experience**

The learning experience of children under seven should be integrated and not compartmentalised. Young children need to experience the relevance of their world before they separate themselves from it and begin to analyze it in a detached way. Consequently learning in kindergarten is integrated rather than subject based. Mathematics and use of mathematical language, for example, might take place at the cooking table, where food is prepared (thinly sliced carrots make wonderful natural circles and have the added virtue of being able to be eaten later in soup!) and concepts such as addition and subtraction (or more or less), weight, measure, quantity and shape are grasped in a practical manner as part of daily life. Mealtimes offer an opportunity for the moral, social and mathematical to work together as children engage in place setting and

the sharing of food, which has been prepared earlier for everyone to eat.

Through movement games, children recognise and recreate patterns - in, out, alternate, in front of, behind. Natural objects such as acorns, pinecones, conkers and shells are sorted, ordered and counted, as part of spontaneous play. Our children are directly involved in mathematical experience and use mathematical language in a natural way, which is usually embedded in a social and moral context. Learning experiences for the young child are not separated from the business of daily living: we feel that learning gains meaning by its relevance to life.

As indicated above, a similar approach is taken to the teaching of language and literacy. Children develop competence in talking, listening and in the ability to use words with confidence they speak freely and learn to listen to others. Good speech and the development of aural skills are promoted. We concentrate on the oral tradition and the children listen to many wonderful stories - which belong to the literary heritage of the culture of childhood.

A well-told story creates an appreciation for the human voice and the beauty and rhythms of language. It also helps to extend vocabulary and to aid the development of a good memory. Children leave kindergarten with a rich and varied repertoire of songs, stories and poems; this might also include verses or words in other languages. Much of this learning will have taken place in the integrated way described - although story-time is always a very special event. Stories are also brought to the children in the form of puppet shows, which help those children who are learning English as an additional language to understand the stories.

Children engage in many activities, such as sewing, which develop hand to eye co-ordination, manual dexterity and orientation (useful preparation for reading print from left to right). Children also discuss their own drawings and take great delight in telling stories by 'reading' their pictures. This activity promotes the development of verbal skills and frees the narrative from the printed text, thus encouraging children to use their own words. Many children also act out or perform puppet shows and develop dramatic skills through working with narrative and dialogue. Painting and drawing help with balance and symmetry and most five year-olds are able to write their own name. Children experience the musicality of language and its social aspects through playing ring games and eurythmy, a form of movement, which works with language and music.

The combination of these activities cultivates a love of language, promotes fluency and allows children time to become really familiar with the spoken word - the best preparation and foundation for the subsequent development of literacy. Use of language also affects cognitive development as well-chosen words and good syntax support clear thinking.

### **Encouraging learning through creative play and supporting physical development**

Children are able to exercise and consolidate their ability to understand and to think through their play. Creative play supports physical, emotional and social development and allows children to learn through investigation, exploration and discovery. It also gives scope for the use of imagination - an essential aspect of human intelligence. Play encourages the child to become inventive and adaptable, and to work with initiative and

flair. In addition it develops and strengthens concentration.

Studies show that children who score highest in socio-dramatic play also demonstrate the greatest gains in a number of cognitive areas such as higher intellectual competence, longer attention span, and more innovation and imaginativeness. Good players also show more empathy toward others, less aggression, and in general more social and emotional adjustment. We would expect time and space to be given to creative play and a selection of suitable objects, for instance cloths, shells, logs, domestic toys and dolls to be provided in order to support a variety of play situations.

### **Encouraging children to know and love the world**

As mentioned in the section on rhythm and repetition, children develop a good and healthy relationship to the natural world. They learn to value its gifts and to understand its processes and patterns of change. Domestic tasks provide opportunities for elementary experiences in science and good use is made of the four elements. Children make toys from sheep's wool, wood, felt, cotton and other natural materials. Many items are made as gifts for family members. Family participation is encouraged and teachers, working with parents, create 'birthday stories' which are based on the child's personal biography and are told at special ceremonies to which families are invited.

People in the community who practise a particular craft, or who have special skills, may be invited to visit kindergarten and we regularly take children for short local walks in the park.

### **Providing a safe child-friendly environment**

The kindergarten should be a warm and welcoming place, an artistically shaped free space that serves as the setting for what the day's impulse brings. This 'impulse' is a mixture of child motivated play experiences and teacher-structured activities. There are few 'finished' toys, which demand to be used in a predetermined way. Furniture is small-scale and child-friendly and, as mentioned, the day is structured so as to provide the child with periods of activity and periods of rest. Groups are of a mixed age range and older children, who are familiar with the rhythm of the particular kindergarten, are able to help the younger members of the group to feel secure.

### **Working with parents**

We are committed to establishing good relationships with our parents and to the process of developing parenting skills. We recognise the importance of a happy, smooth transition from home to school and we work closely with our parents to achieve this end. We offer weekly parent and child sessions and try to build good rapport with the family before the child enters kindergarten. Teachers promote and emphasise the importance of close partnerships with parents and provide a focus for parent support. Links are also created with parents through a range of social and school-based events and activities. Close liaison between parent and teacher is encouraged.

### **An example of a Kindergarten session**

Perhaps the best way to exemplify the integration of the above educational aims is to describe a typical Kindergarten morning session. This example, of course, only highlights one range of activities. Normally each day of the week would have its own main focus

and these vary with the changing seasons.

The Kindergarten staff spend hours in their Kindergartens both before the children arrive in the morning and after they have gone. There are activities and materials to prepare, of course, but more importantly there has to be the right mood in the place. The staff often meets in the morning to say a verse together before going to their rooms to be there when the children arrive.

As the children begin to arrive, the Kindergarten leader is already busy so that the children, having hung up their coats and changed their shoes, can be given a homely welcome. At first there may be a period of free play with small groups of children choosing their area, perhaps getting the dolls up and dressed, building with small logs or driving a bus made from an upturned chair. The adults are usually engaged in some task, such as preparing the dough if it is baking day. There is conversation and some of the children may prefer to be around the adults, as children traditionally have been, watching, 'helping', while adults work, asking questions and so on. These informal moments are vital, not least in a world in which every one is often so busy.

The adults initiate the next phase by beginning to clear the things away and the children join in helping each tool or object to find its place on shelf or in basket. The forces of imitation are strongest at this age and can be most easily directed when the adults perform their tasks in a conscious and careful way, repeating the gestures of each action in a rhythmical and natural way. Children can learn to do quite complex practical tasks, even involving sharp or awkward tools or equipment, if they see them regularly performed with love and care.

Tidying up is an important task and it is done in such a way that it does not occur to the children that this is something which spoils their fun or is a tedious chore. Once things have been put back in their places, the children gather for ringtime during which traditional songs are sung, rhythmical verses are spoken and acted out. Sometimes the eurhythmist or foreign language teacher may visit and contribute to the circle's activities. These activities help focus the children's attention and especially strengthen their linguistic skills. Listening and clear articulation can be exercised through this kind of rhythmical recitation. Afterwards, the children go to the toilet and wash their hands. Some of the older ones who are first back help lay and set the table with place mats, cutlery and perhaps a vase of flowers. Bread is cut and everyone gathers to say a grace and sing some seasonal songs. There is no deliberate effort to teach the children in any formal sense. The children imitate the conscious activity of the teacher.

Following the morning snack, some of the children help clear up while others go off to a second period of free play or another artistic or handicraft activity. Here the children follow by example and may paint or model for as long as their interest lasts. This might be the time to go outdoors into the garden or sandpit, or may even involve a walk to a nearby park. Once more everyone returns, coats and scarves are hung up, things are carefully put away and then all gather, perhaps around a chair in the 'story corner'. The morning concludes with the Kindergarten teacher telling a fairy story. By then the parents are waiting outside to collect the children. Some Kindergartens include afternoon sessions as well. In this case lunch is eaten, followed by a rest and then further periods of

play.

Each day of the week has its own artistic or handicraft activity, such as a baking day. While most Kindergartens offer watercolour painting and drawing with wax crayons, or beeswax modelling and eurythmy, the handicrafts vary according to the facilities or the particular skills of the adults concerned. In all these activities the children learn by example, finding their way in to the experiences at their own pace. In this way the children learn to explore and be creative whilst acquiring a love of work. This manifests itself in an increasing mood of self-reliance and calm industriousness when the children are engaged. The same mood is carried over into creative play. A strong and lively rhythm helps give the children a deep sense of security.

### **Introduction to Formal Learning**

Many years of experience confirm that literacy and numeracy, as formal skills, are best taught when the child has reached a point of maturation which corresponds to the emergence of the second teeth. The principled approach of Steiner Waldorf practitioners to not forcing early literacy and numeracy leads to Class One pupils (at 6+) learning to read and to work formally with number with such enthusiasm and alacrity because:

- a) They have reached a point of developmental readiness,
- b) The diversity of lively hands-on experience, which they have encountered in their kindergartens, supports and enriches this learning process,
- c) They are motivated learners, unburdened by early failure.

### **The Older child in the Kindergarten**

Please see our separate curriculum policy for our oldest children in kindergarten (post EYFS).

### **FURTHER INFORMATION:**

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