

Discipline in a Rudolf Steiner School

By Eileen Hutchins

One of the favorite accusations against a Rudolf Steiner School is that there is no discipline, and one of the greatest difficulties for a new teacher is to establish orderly habits of behavior in his class.

It is natural that in any work where the old conventions are laid aside, the new forms of life take some while to develop. Yet everyone will agree that some kind of law and order is desirable. We cannot approve if children destroy beautiful materials, or if they are cruel to those weaker than themselves. We can hardly allow deliberate disobedience or pass unchallenged rude and disrespectful behavior. Punishment in itself, however rarely improves anyone, and it is well

Known that the child who is always being punished is bound to be always in mischief. We can condemn misbehavior, but can we inspire the culprit to do better?

In the end we can only attain the kind of conduct we desire by helping the children in our care to unfold harmoniously. This, is a long and strenuous task and so lapses we need to bear with present shortcomings or lapses so as not to lose our distant ideal. For this is the only, real solution: the culprit has to become a changed being.

In a Rudolf Steiner School the teacher has two strong aids to his task. The first is the content of his lessons; for the curriculum is carefully planned so that the subjects introduced meet with the inner needs of the child. For the new teacher this not always appear to work at once. Children to-day are so restless and unconcentrated, that the magical subject may not seem to appeal. The teacher has to think again and again in his preparation how to bring it in a way to meet their needs. But his love and enthusiasm for his subject have in them the power to succeed.

The second aid is the teacher's bond of fellowship with the children in his care. He may have some who present special difficulties or show marked antipathy, but if he concerns himself with them sufficiently, if out of lesson hours he lives with them in his heart, little by little he will gain the required authority; and then the child who began by hating will learn to love and trust.

Both of these aids are long-term measures and the new teacher may be faced here, and now with a naughty and disobedient class. What can he do? The first essential is the confidence that he will succeed in the end. Doubt is the greatest enemy. It is only too easy for one who approaches his task in all humility to feel, "The children are wiser than I. What right have I to assert my authority?" Then the children will do just as they please to the misery of themselves as well as everyone else, for they frankly acknowledge that they really like a strict teacher. Our thoughts before entering the classroom should rather be, "The children are no doubt greater personalities than I, but I am here because I have a certain content to bring them. To offer this content worthily I need to win their attention and for that I will patiently strive." The teacher who accepts his task as a weighty responsibility will win his discipline.

One of the most important lessons for the teacher to learn is how to create the right mood in his class. It is not enough to enter the classroom in the morning thinking that hearty goodwill and the enjoyment of one's subject will carry one through the day. We need to be able to play upon our class like an orchestra. Sometimes the mood should be grave, sometimes gay, but just as in an orchestra the different instruments have to play together, so in a class the different characters and temperaments have to feel one another's presence. This unity is won in many ways. One of the most important arts to develop with a class is the art of conversation, particularly where the children are led to be thoughtful. Any special occasion can give the opportunity: in the younger classes, a birthday or the death of a friend, a public event or a festival such as Christmas or Easter. The teacher call perhaps speak to the children of how years ago they were not on the earth at all, and years hence they will again have to leave the earth; and when they came they had no possessions, they were tiny and naked, and when they leave they will have to part from all they own. But after all did they really bring nothing to earth, and will they really take nothing with them when they go? And then the children will become attentive and give beautiful answers of which the teacher himself would never think. The common interest in the theme binds them all together.

Another art is that of helping each child to appreciate the others. The teacher needs to handle children differently according to their temperament and this is so favorite a theme that I will not develop it here; but a fact that is not always recognized is that children should also come to understand one another's gifts and shortcomings. There is often a Cinderella in the class and the teacher may sometime overhear such remarks as, "Oh, don't take any notice of Alice, she is cracked."

Then he must watch his opportunity to praise Alice, He can perhaps say, "Sometimes people laugh at Alice, but you see she is the only one who thought of bringing flowers for the classroom. It would be good if all of you were so thoughtful."

Perhaps, too there is a very fidgety boy and here is a task to be done of fetching and carrying for which everyone is anxious to be chosen. Then the teacher says, "Shall we let *John* do it to-day. You see, all of you know how to sit still; but it is so difficult for John he can't quite do it yet so I think we must keep him busy and then he will not worry you all." If children can be led to a sympathetic interest in one another's weaknesses and a desire to help and put these right, the teacher will find them powerful allies. Every class teacher knows how helpful a brotherly sisterly relationship can be in a class.

Now although we always aim at working with the positive qualities rather than punishing the negative, children's conduct does sometimes need drastic treatment. Just as the Jews of the Old Testament needed-to experience their God as a jealous God who when they erred, revealed himself to them in wrath, so the children between seven and ten sometimes need to experience righteous indignation. It is far the most effective punishment if little boys are cruel, for their teacher to show anger. It is essential during the class-teacher period that children should learn to obey. Generally if a teacher is sufficiently patient and firm even those who oppose at first will obey in the end, but in cases of deliberate disobedience punishment maybe justifiable.

It is very often the children who come late into our schools who give rise to the criticism of rude and unruly behavior among our pupils. Those who have suffered elsewhere from the strain of competition and the punishments meted out to the dull and inept, generally feel at first a sense of great relief. They begin to gain confidence and become brighter and more friendly; then comes a kind of rebound. They start to take advantage of the good-natured people who are too easy-going to punish them. With such children I think strictness and suitable punishments are necessary as long as the teacher continues at the same time to feel goodwill and to build up a more positive relationship.

With children in their very early teens it is often possible to get into a kind of permanent state of war. Antagonisms at this age are very violent, and teachers are rightly careful not to commit some action which the pupil may regard as unforgivable. I have known many girls who have nurtured real or imaginary wrongs which they have never overcome. Here the problem is answered by the attitude of mind which the teacher adopts. If he can refrain from all personal pride and feeling so indignation that he has not been treated respectfully, if he can again and again view the misconduct in an entirely objective way so that the punishment can fit the deed and not be an act of personal pique, than he will find that the situation begins to change and, the pupil, who opposed him, makes a real connection out of her interest in her lessons.

So far I have written of the individual teacher's task, but there is also the task of collaboration in building up an orderly school life. It is easier to remain a brilliant individualist than it is to agree with one's colleagues about a common policy. Yet for the sake new teachers it is important that good habits and good traditions should be established. Just as certain courtesies in social life are helpful in our intercourse together, so certain regular habits of conduct are desirable in a school, and these are not difficult to attain if the staff are single in purpose. In our own school, each class waits outside the class-room until the teacher arrives and the lesson cannot begin until the children have entered, stood quietly behind their desks, and said "Good morning or Good afternoon" as the case may be.

At the end of the lesson they again stand behind their desks before being dismissed. If they know that the teacher is determined not to start until they are all quiet, they soon grow used to this as a habit) and it is easier for all new teachers when such habits have been acquired.

Of course other methods may be equally effective in other schools, but it is a pity if each teacher follows his own individual line for then in the classes of the more casual members of the staff, disorder will reign. The class teacher himself may be able to cope with it but it is a terrible experience for a newcomer to go to a classroom where the children are shouting and chasing one another and where he has to clap or stamp until they choose to attend. Yet this too is only a habit they behave in a way which has always been allowed. The more orderly the arrangements we make for break-time and dinner-hour, for the traffic in the corridors and the use of the cloak rooms, the more smoothly the daily life of the school will run. It is worthwhile to make the effort.

The teachers also need to collaborate in keeping the school beautiful. Children are very ready to take pride both in their class-rooms and their books and when their teachers are strict that litter should be cleared away or that untidy messy.

Writing should be done again, they accept this as just and right. They also take pleasure in the personal appearance of their teachers and it is an aid to discipline to be attractively dressed and well groomed. Every common deed has its particular beauty. The cleaning and the washing up, the tidying of the dining room and the preparing of vegetables are all too readily regarded as menial and unworthy, but we have failed with the older children if we cannot set an example which makes them glad to share in these tasks.

The most vital work which the teachers can do together is the studying and sharing of their ideals of education. Often when the annoyances of everyday drive one to petty dealings and misunderstandings, the thoughts awakened by anthroposophy with regard to the true nature of man, raise all judgments to a higher level. When difficult children have been discussed in this light even though no action is taken, they seem to feel themselves better understood and to respond accordingly.

The problem of discipline cannot be answered once and for all; it has to be met every day anew, and each teacher out of his own nature and attainments will deal differently. Some will never have disorder in their classes and will always command prompt obedience. Others will be surrounded by noise and movement, yet the children will learn and make progress. The martinet is a great help in keeping law and order in the general routine of life but he may be too impatient with those who are sensitive and delicate. The artist may give the most beautiful lessons but he maybe incompetent in dealing with larger groups of children. As a staff we need to recognize that each teacher has a valuable gift to bring and each has some shortcoming that needs to be made good. Every virtue has its shadow. Hence appreciation of one another's qualities is an essential foundation of our work, and only through an active collaboration are we able to form an orderly school life in which the children can unfold their individual gifts and find their appointed tasks.