

L3) History Education in Steiner Schools.

By Dr Robert Rose

History education in Steiner Schools has a distinctive quality to it that makes it different from mainstream. In addition to the age-phase related methodology, in which the teaching and learning methods are tied in with the three sub-phases of child development in the lower school; there is also the fact that the content covers all the main stages of human civilisation since the beginning of recorded history.

Moreover, history education in Steiner settings calls upon the teacher not to merely recount the people and events of history, offering causal explanations along the way, but to engage with it inwardly and that this influences the way the lessons are brought to the children and thus enables them to inwardly feel themselves as being within the flow of history.

For this subject during this module you will need to read: Aiston, K & Rawson, M (eds) (2014): *The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum*, Floris Books. Chapter 18, History.

History Methodologies Across the Lower School

In general, Steiner made the case that History Education, as normally practiced in his time, should only be taught after around the age of twelve. This conviction was due to the prevalence of cause and effect modes of explanation used in the then history education. There are however some indications that Steiner viewed history as teachable before then if a different methodology was used:

“Children are not mature enough to **understand** history before the age of twelve. You can certainly prepare them for learning about history by **telling stories** or by giving them **short biographical sketches**, or even by telling them stories with a moral. **They become mature enough to learn history through learning about botany and zoology as I have described it.** You can achieve a great deal in regard to history if, in botany, you have presented the earth as a unity and shown how the various plants grow upon the earth’s surface during the different seasons of the year, and if they understand the human being as a synthesis of various groups of animals - that is, if you have presented each of the animal groups as something one-sided which then harmoniously unites with the others in the human being. When children move through such ideas, you prepare them for learning history.” Steiner, R (1920): The Renewal of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 198/9. (My bold)

The difference between history in the three sub-divisions appears to be between **understanding (ca 12th -14 yrs)**, **biographical sketches (ca 10th - 12th yrs)** and **telling stories (ca 7th - 10th yrs)**. This he elaborated in another place concerning the middle sub-phase:

“Therefore to introduce history between the tenth and the twelfth year, we must bring it as **images** that engender a **warmth of feeling** and inwardly uplift the students’ souls. This is possible through telling the children of **biographical events** and by **characterizing certain concrete events that form a whole**. But we must not introduce the abstract ideas and impulses behind certain historical eras. Students should meet these in their twelfth year, which is when they begin to take a stand in the outer world. Here again you can see how an inner development gradually extends outward. Now students are ready to grasp how historical impulses, manifesting in outer events, affect the lives of people.” Steiner, R (1921): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 190. (My bold).

These distinctions are important for Steiner as they give another example of how a particular part of the education can be adapted to the development of the child. How this is interpreted by each teacher Steiner leaves open.

Steiner elaborates on the age specific approach to history education explaining the roles each sub-phase has in the development of history education:

“The ability to grasp historical connections—to gain an overall view of historical developments and the underlying impulses and social implications—represents the other side of the stage where students are able to comprehend the physical and mineral aspects of life. Only toward the twelfth year are they mature enough for both of these aspects. Historical **ideas** and **impulses**, which are expressed outwardly in definite historical periods and directly affect social life and forms, are like the **skeleton of history**, although—seen in a purely historical context— they may also be something quite different. The **flesh**, or **muscles**, so to speak, are represented by the **lives of historical personages** as well as by **concrete historical events**. Therefore, to introduce history between the tenth and the twelfth year, we must bring it as **images** that engender a **warmth of feeling** and inwardly uplift the students’ souls. This is possible through telling the children of biographical events and by characterizing certain concrete events that **form a whole**. But we must not introduce the abstract ideas and impulses behind certain historical eras. Students should meet these in their twelfth year, which is when they begin to take a stand in the outer world. Here again you can see how an inner development gradually extends outward. Now students are ready to grasp how historical impulses, manifesting in outer events, affect the lives of people.” Steiner, R (1921/2): Soul Economy, Anthroposophic Press, p. 190. (My bold)

Steiner also developed a different method to the researching and teaching of history. He called this “**Symptomatological History**”. He distinguished this from the “cause and effect” approach dominant in his day:

“We do not teach causal history or pragmatic history or any of the other wonderful things people have admired at various times. Causal history assumes that what follows is always the result of some event preceding it. However, if you have a surface of water and you look at the waves, one following the other, can you say that each wave is the result of the one preceding it? Would you instead not need to look into the depths of the water to find the reasons, the general cause of the series of waves? It is no different in history... If people do not develop an awareness for these patterns during childhood, they can remain obstinate in their belief of pragmatic or causal history. They remain fixed in their understanding of history and later have little tendency to accept anything that has a real future. In contrast to all other presentations of history, we could call our presentation **symptomatological history**. Those who try to view history symptomatologically do not believe it is necessary to look at each individual event and describe it for itself. Instead, they see such events as symptoms of deeper development.” Steiner, R (1920): The Renewal of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 207. (My bold)

This approach to history education was Steiner’s attempt to find the deeper realities of human life, to find deeper links between people and events in time rather than a mere sequence of causes and effects.

Having said that, he was not against the idea of teaching causal history at all, it was simply a question of at what age and in what way this could be done:

“Causal links between earlier and later historical events can be taught meaningfully only at the dawn of the regressive forces of the astral body; these forces come increasingly into their own after the fourteenth year. At about the twelfth year, children enter this reverse stream, and this is the time when one can begin to appeal to a sense of causality in history as well.” Steiner, R (1923): The Child’s Changing Consciousness, Anthroposophic press, p. 110/1.

Steiner goes on to discuss one of the outcomes of the Symptomatological approach to history:

“A truly living consideration of history requires that people understand external events as symptoms of something hidden within, and they need some idea of what considering those symptoms means. When you consider history from a symptomatological perspective, you will slowly realize that first there is an **ascent**, then the highest point of a certain event is reached, and then a **descent** follows.” Steiner, R (1920): The Renewal of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 209. (My bold)

History education then consists in a consideration of the ascent and descent of certain events and, as he discusses elsewhere, the ascent and descent of civilisations. The aim here is to acquire a deep understanding of the development, including the ascent and descent, of civilisations over the millennia.

We may offer the beginning of an interpretation here:

Sub-phase 1: 7th – 10th yrs	Sub-phase 2: 10th -12th yrs	Sub-phase 3: 12th -14th yrs
The Evolving Pedagogy / Learning Process 		
Imaginative Stories: 1) Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience. 2) Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.	Characterisations: Biographies, Events forming a whole. The flesh and muscles of history.	Understanding: Symptomology, concepts, ideas, impulses in history, causes and effects. The skeleton of history

From a methodological perspective, this describes the process of history education across the lower school.

History as a Living Concept of Time

One of the more specific questions that Steiner addressed concerning the appropriate methodologies in history teaching is how to introduce children to distant historical periods. For him, the most appropriate approach is by developing a living concept through connecting history to real life human beings living in the present age:

“When we teach history, we are open to the danger of losing sight of the human being. We have seen that in a truly beneficial education, we must give everything its proper place... If history is to be communicated in a living way to people, we must first awaken a concept of **time that is connected to the human being**”. Steiner, R (1923): Modern Art of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 150/1. (My bold)

“All of history becomes a part of life at school when it is presented as a **living concept of time**. History must never be separated from human beings. Children must not see it as just so much book learning. Many people seem to think that history is contained in books, although it’s not always quite that bad. In any case, we must use every possible way to awaken a sense of history that lives, with human beings in its flow.” Steiner, R (1923): Modern Art of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 152. (My bold)

The idea he proposed consisted in considering past historical periods with people who are alive today. One example he gave was:

“But suppose I begin by telling the students, “You are ten years old, so you were alive in 1913. Your father is much older than you, and he was alive in 1890, and his father was alive in 1850. Now imagine stretching your arm back to your father, who stretches his arm back to his father, your grandfather. Now you have reached back to 1850.” The students then begin to realize that three or four generations represent just about one century. The generations run backward from the twentieth century and bring students to their very early ancestors. Therefore, the sixtieth generation of ancestors leads to the era of Christ’s birth. If the classroom is large enough, it may be possible to arrange the children in a line and have them stretch their arms from one to another, so that the sixtieth child represents an ancestor living at the time of Christ’s birth. **Space thus becomes time.**”

Steiner, R (1923): Modern Art of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 151/2. (My bold)

History as Qualities of Heart and Soul

But it was not just the development of the living concept that was important for Steiner, it is also the inner feeling and will element that is significant. Rather than merely presenting and developing **ideas** devoid of emotion and volition, it is also about these inner qualities:

“by teaching history in a living way to children of nine to twelve, we fill them with an element that arises from the **inner qualities of heart and soul**, not merely from the nature of space. History lessons must be permeated thoroughly with a quality of the heart. Thus, we present it as much as possible through images.. One’s descriptions must be coloured with both morality and religious feeling, without making the mistake of using them as examples for moral or religious admonition. Above all, history must take hold of the students’ **feeling and will**”. Steiner, R (1923): Modern Art of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 152. (My bold)

History as the Inner Living of Events

It is for Steiner, the imbuing of history teaching with emotion and volition that it may become possible that it can become inwardly lived:

“They must be able to experience a personal relationship with historical individuals and ways of life in the various eras. Nor do we need to limit ourselves to describing **people**. We could describe the **life** of a twelfth-century town, but whatever we say must go into the feelings and volition of the children. They must be able to “**live**” the **events**, thus forming themselves within them by arousing their own **sympathies** and **antipathies**, because their feelings and will are stimulated”. Steiner, R (1923): Modern Art of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 153. (My bold)

History as the Inner Reality of the Teacher

To achieve this, the teacher needs develop within themselves a deep inner experience of history, it is only then that this may become an inner experience for the students:

“Teachers must be so well prepared that the only thing left to do is to shape the lesson in an artistic way. The problem of teaching is thus not just a matter of interest, diligence, and devotion on the part of the **students**, but mostly on the part of the **teacher**. Lessons should never be presented until they have been **deeply experienced within the teacher’s spirit**. Of course, the faculty must be organized so that the teachers have enough time to fully and intensely experience the lessons... If we teach history out of notebooks, children come to a certain conclusion— not consciously, but subconsciously. The unconscious, intellectual conclusion, rooted deeply in a child’s organism, is this: Why should one learn all these things? The teacher doesn’t know them and must use notes. Anyone can do that, so there is no need to learn them... Another aspect is this: *when teaching history, it must flow with elemental force from the teacher. It must never be abstract; the teacher, as a human being, must be the vital factor* Steiner, R (1923): Modern Art of Education, Anthroposophic Press, p. 153/4. (My bold)

Furthermore, Steiner wanted teachers to engage emotionally with the content of history for it is only through this that the children would be inwardly stimulated:

“It is thus important that we use all our own temperamental energies, in order to teach history with a strong personal accent. Objectivity is something the children can develop later in life. To worry about objectivity, when we tell them about Brutus and Caesar, at the expense of expressing the feeling engendered in us during the dramatic presentation of their differences, their polarities—this would be bad teaching. As teachers, we must be involved. We do not need to wax passionate, to roar and rage, but we do need to express at least a delicate **nuance of sympathy or antipathy** toward Caesar and Brutus in our characterization. The children must be stimulated to participate.” Steiner, R (1921): Education for Adolescents, Anthroposophic Press, p. 39.

Clearly, Steiner was talking about a subtle process of emotional participation, not excesses of feeling responses. For him, this is how the child’s objectivity can be safeguarded for the future.

He developed this idea further at another point:

“We meet the other side when teaching history. Around the twelfth year it is impossible to awaken in students an understanding of the complex fabric of historical interconnections. Until that age it is wise for teachers to present graphic descriptions of historical personages whose actions, due to their goodness, truth, and other qualities of greatness, will stimulate sympathy or, in the case of negative qualities, antipathy in the souls of children. At this stage, historical content should appeal, above all, to the students’ feelings. This can be accomplished by a wise selection of historical personalities and events; these should, in themselves, present a complete story, which should nevertheless remain flexible in the students’ minds (in the sense mentioned).” Steiner, R (1923): *The Child’s Changing Consciousness*, Anthroposophic Press, p. 110.

For Steiner then, the teaching of history is not morally neutral. This calls upon the teacher to develop an awareness of “goodness, truth, and other qualities of greatness,” which will help the children develop sympathy towards the good and antipathy towards the bad.

The Content of the History Curriculum

The content of the History Curriculum for the Lower School is largely presented in his “Discussions with Teachers” under the title “Lectures on the Curriculum” (read L3b History Curriculum Lower School). This has of course been developed since his day, but it is worthwhile considering this to give an idea of the scope of history he saw as important for the Lower School. As can be seen from the next slide, Steiner intended that the children be introduced to the whole of history since the beginnings of recorded civilisation. This is obviously a great challenge to any teacher, but Steiner did not see this as requiring the teaching of every single historical fact, rather is more of a covering of history in respect of significant persons, events and stages. The aim was to help the child develop a holistic picture of the stream of time:

History Curriculum with Interpretation

Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Class 7	Class 8
<p>Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience.</p> <p>Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.</p>	<p>Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience.</p> <p>Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.</p>	<p>Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience.</p> <p>Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.</p>	<p>History of the local regions:</p> <p>History of land use,</p> <p>History of elemental industry,</p> <p>The connection with local geography.</p>	<p>Ancient India, Persia, Egypt to Greek History.</p> <p>Connect to the geography of those regions and their related economies.</p>	<p>Greek and Roman history.</p> <p>Middle Ages.</p>	<p>The Renaissance: fifteen to seventeenth centuries.</p>	<p>Modern History up to the Present.</p> <p>Cultural History.</p> <p>The Industrial Revolution.</p> <p>The spiritual & religious undercurrents of history.</p>

Summary of the History Curriculum of the Lower School with Interpretation

Sub-phase 1: 7 th – 10 th yrs		Sub-phase 2: 10 th -12 th yrs		Sub-phase 3: 12 th -14 yrs			
Pedagogy / Methodology							
Histories Stories for Imagination:		Characterisations:			Understanding:		
Imaginative Story Telling		Biographies, Historical Events forming a whole.			Symptomatology, concepts, ideas, impulses in history, causes and effects.		
Curriculum Content							
Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Class 7	Class 8
Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience.	Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience.	Story telling as introducing time based imaginative experience.	History of the local regions: History of land use,	Ancient India, Persia, Egypt to Greek History. Connect to the geography of those regions and their related economies.	Greek and Roman history. Middle Ages.	The Renaissance: fifteen to seventeenth centuries.	Modern History up to the Present.
Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.	Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.	Re-creating a historical person or historical event as an imaginative story.	History of elemental industry, The connection with local geography.				Cultural History. The Industrial Revolution. The spiritual & religious undercurrents of history.

Exercises

- 1) Choose a class for which you are about to teach history. Identify a historical period according to the class and what content you are going to work with. For example, for class 8 consider how you would teach something about the industrial revolution in the 19th century and your reasons for doing so.
- 2) Consider a similar example from Roman history, but this time for class 6.
- 3) Suppose you were to introduce some historical figure to class 1 (not usually done) but in the form of an imaginative story. Create a short story to do this. For example, imagine a story called “Two Good Teachers”, based loosely on the lives and characters of Plato and Aristotle. The aim here is not to teach the children about philosophy but give them an artistic impression of these most influential of all philosophers as **people** and their **time**.

In these cases, use the principles introduced in this module.