

Focus on the Middle School – Part 2

Imaginative Capacity as a Response to the Challenges of the Present

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With the release of the astral body, the whole structure of the human constitutional elements in the middle school years from classes 6 to 8 is transformed. A new, individually coloured, powerful field of tension arises between two poles of soul experience:

- On the one hand, the young person in a certain sense increasingly experiences themselves at this age as having been "thrown out" into the external environment and world affairs. All external things, from social human interaction to the digitalised media world, make a deep and existential impression on them. In tandem with that, the desire grows to grasp phenomena with the thinking.
- At the same time a new register of emotions develops in this process of transformation which gradually becomes more conscious and now leads to profound questions about our own existence with equal existential force. The search for the qualities of experience of connectedness and meaningfulness has its origins in the innermost individual being of the young person.

The challenge to bring both poles into a reciprocal relationship, to make them interact, becomes an educational balancing act which shapes the process of spiritual, soul and physical rediscovery in the middle school.

Let us look, for example, at the desire of pupils to question and penetrate topics and connections to a greater extent with the thinking: If the lesson responds to this desire

too strongly with a systematised or even standardised methodological sequence of steps towards a one-sided capacity to reproduce knowledge, then the impulses acting from outside will become too determinative, too dominant. The consequence is a hardening as far down as the constitutional structure of the young person.

But the other pole of wholly inner feeling can become one-sided if, for example, the lesson keeps stringing together ever new experiences in portrayals and activities without allowing for a sufficient antipathetic distance to question and reflect on the experience. Here, too, there can be profound consequences which reveal themselves in habitual withdrawal, a dreamy lack of orientation or a certain reluctance to come into contact with the external world.

These few indications alone raise the question as to the methodological steps which could lead to a reciprocal transformation, to the interaction between inwardly and outwardly experienced impulses in lessons. Here Rudolf Steiner brings a human capacity into play which contains a potentially great educational transformative capacity: the imagination.

The Imagination in the Anthroposophical Understanding of the Human Being

In the first course for teachers in 1919, the presentation of the threefold nature of the human organism in *Study of Man* builds up to the fourteenth lecture. There lies the concluding focus of the reflections that everything is interpenetrated by everything else;

every single physical organisation bears qualities and tendencies of the others within itself. Thus, the head is not just the head but in its middle region of the nose is connected with the cardio-pulmonary sphere of the human middle. Towards the bottom, the head, in contrast, displays qualities of the limbs in the human being in the mobility of the lower jaw. The question as to the way in which the organisation of the torso as the middle of the human being is also penetrated by the other spheres leads upwards to the larynx. The head quality of the torso arises where we, as human beings, form the sound shapes of language starting in the larynx.

In the lower region of the torso we have a different picture in the penetration of the metabolic and limb quality. To the extent that the young person from the age of twelve connects more strongly with the supporting skeletal system of the body, they are penetrated to a greater extent by the limb forces. Steiner uses the expression of "pressing into" from outside for such penetration: "Just as one finds in the first years of school life that what penetrated the teeth before the age of seven is now pressing into the soul, so in the later years of schooling one finds pressing into the child's soul all that arises from the limb nature and comes to its rightful expression after puberty. ..."¹

The metamorphosis at the eruption of the permanent teeth relates to the organ-forming etheric growth forces which are transformed into forces of learning and memory. The metamorphosis in the middle school years relates to the astral body in a doubly mysterious way. Mostly highlighted is the connection in the soul of the growing young person with the laws of the skeletal system,

leading to the capacity for causal thinking and maturation of the power of judgement.

Another side of this metamorphosis relates not to the skeletal system but the warmth-infused blood and muscular system of the limbs. In the school years before the birth of the astral body, the latter has inscribed itself, we might say, as a feeling quality into the rhythmical and musical aspect and into all movement (cf. Part 1, *Journal* 63). This warmth and impulse aspect of the limbs is transformed in the years of puberty into the inner soul capacity of the imagination. In summary, in turning to the limb system, two polar abilities develop which take hold of the totality of the young person only as they combine or interpenetrate:

the development of causal thinking and power of judgement in combination with the laws of the skeletal system;

the development of the imagination in combination with the rhythm and warmth forces of the blood and muscular system of the limbs.

If we look at the middle school years as a time when the course is set for the future biography, it becomes clear why Steiner places such express emphasis on the educational importance of the imagination at the end of the course for teachers: "It is to this power of imagination that we must especially appeal in the latter part of the period between the change of teeth and puberty. We are much more justified in encouraging the child of seven to develop its own intellectuality by way of reading and writing than we are justified in neglecting to bring imagination continually into the growing power of judgment of the child of twelve. It is from the age of twelve onwards that the power of judgment gradually develops."²

1 Rudolf Steiner, *Study of Man*, Lecture 14, CW 293, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1995.

2 Ibid

Wholly in accordance with the structure of the first course for teachers, the foundations in the anthroposophical understanding of the human being are subsequently developed into methodological steps. The examples of optical laws in the "darkroom" of the eye and the transformation of coloured areas in the theorem of Pythagoras illustrate the educational potential of the imagination: Where it comes alive through inner activity, both in the teacher and pupil, a profound connection with learning and content arises in the pupils. The enhancement of empathetic, creatively involved understanding and a deeper interest form the basis for a feeling of responsibility towards the world.

In view of contemporary events, shaped by the ad hoc availability, repeatability and usability of unlimited databases, for example in the use of digital media, such a feeling of responsibility is of the greatest educational value. Thus, Eduard Kaeser describes the phenomenon of "post-truth judgements" in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* under the heading "Googling instead of Knowing": "In the digital world a permanent drizzle of information erodes crucial standards such as objectivity and truth."³

Let us summarise here the qualities of experience and learning enabled by the imagination, not in place of but through infusing the intellectual learning of content:

- The imagination starts by transforming the attitude so that interest and active inner creative involvement develop.
- It thereby enables enhanced perceptual capacity.
- Where it is at work, it produces new ways of looking at things, new perspectives.

- In the greater inner involvement of the young person, it forms the basis for a deeper inner connection with and responsibility towards the world.
- Where inner impulse and outer event harmonise in the subject matter, the young person can experience the quality of meaningfulness.

From "Modelling" to "Actual" Imagination

If, in conclusion, we look at the metamorphoses of the imagination in the middle school, various key moments can be seen in the grades:

In class 6, the pupils approach the intellectual grasp of causalities, for example in the subjects of mineralogy, physics and Roman history. The imagination greatly influences the mental impressions which then lead to the description of observations and the raising of questions. There is a crucial educational difference whether a historical sequence of events is narrated and then reproduced or whether situations and personalities come alive in inner pictures of the imagination. Steiner selects the depiction of Caesar as an example of such a capacity of imaginative "modelling" in class 6: "If, for example, we told a child not just what Caesar did but if at the same time we taught the child an imaginative concept of Caesar, in a sense painted a historical situation for them so that the child is compelled to have what I might describe as a kind of silhouette, a kind of nebulous image of Caesar in the imagination, seeing him walking, following him as he walks; ... so that in a sense they not only draw a copy of him but model him in the imagination, ..."⁴

In class 7, the pupils can take a big step beyond such "modelling" in the imagination.

³ Eduard Kaeser, "Googeln statt Wissen", *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 22 August 2016.

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *Education for Adolescents*, CW 302, SteinerBooks, 1996.

Where encounters and life situations are described, the imagination can now apprehend the human motivations and soul drama. The subtle weighing up of decisions is accompanied by an inner sense of truth. The following words by a class 7 pupil about the life of Leonardo has echoes of such a "humanly empathetic" imagination: "But one morning she discovered his secretly painted pictures under the mattress and showed them to his father Ser Piero. The latter wanted to burn them immediately but he first took a look at them. He saw that they included some very good pictures. And since he was not a master of such things, he went to Master Verrocio. ... Ser Piero thought that if the pictures were no good then Leonardo should become a notary exactly like himself. But if they were good, then he could become a painter if he wanted."

A further mysterious quality of the imagination can be developed by class 8 pupils. Beyond "human empathy" they display the capacity to relate to the lesson or life situation that surrounds them out of an inner, free imagination. Such moments of freely adopting a new position make a deep impression on all involved since at that moment they produce something new out of the inner human being and in this sense it cannot be planned. This can happen in geography lessons when looking at the situation of starving peoples, or in a critical moment of community building. After an incident during a rehearsal for the class play, one pupil (not involved in the incident) cannot help but exclaim: "We can't start rehearsals tomorrow like this. I will come this afternoon and tidy the stage. Will anyone help me?"

A characteristic element of such free expression, next to its immediacy and unpredictability, is the will at that moment to stand up for an inner ideal. The ability to take on responsibility freely in that way is described by Steiner as the birth of the "actual" imagination which only becomes possible as the astral body is released: "This rhythmical element now becomes transmuted into the adolescent's receptiveness for all that belongs to the realm of creative ideas, for all that belongs to fantasy. Fundamentally speaking, genuine powers of fantasy find their birth only during puberty, for they can come into their own only after the astral body has been born ..."⁵

Where teaching is successful in stimulating these forces of the imagination and perceiving them in their individual manifestation, an important foundation is laid for the subsequent challenges of upper school: in coming to terms with the outer phenomena of the world, much depends on those inner moments of freedom, whether and how the inner initiative of will can combine with clear thinking. An enabling foundation for these moments of freedom is provided by the stages from the pictorial imagination in kindergarten and the lower school

- via the modelling in the imagination in class 6;
- and the humanly empathetic imagination in class 7;
- to the imagination in free responsibility in class 8.

The third part of this account will concern itself with the perspective of the teacher and faculty: How can steps for greater individualisation be realised in the middle school?

5 Rudolf Steiner, *Soul Economy. Body, Soul and Spirit in Waldorf Education*, Lecture 13, CW 303, Steiner-Books, 2003.