

The Class 1 Child

The second stage of childhood, which we begin in Class 1 at the age of about 7, marks the beginning of the primary years. The child having formed all the main physical organs, now just needs to grow. The nature of their thinking begins to change and they readily turn their attention and energy to more conscious learning and direct instruction. There is still dreaminess in the child, but they are becoming more connected with the earth, especially with nature. Their ability to focus is developing but concentration is still limited. They live in a world of colour and pictorial thinking and this is what they best respond to in learning. They begin to want to be more independent in action rather than imitation, though this is a very gradual process.

All that energy of the life force or the etheric body of the child that was so busy building the body is now free to be used for **memory** and **pictorial thinking**, or the **imagination** in formal learning.

In essence the Class One child is ready for formal learning and more abstract thinking. Steiner firmly believed that formal teaching before the age of seven compromised the physical and emotional wellbeing of the child. This is quite insightful as there is a significant amount of research on effective education and some of the most effective education systems in the world do not begin formal learning until the age of seven.

We need to respect this development clock of childhood. When this is done not only are the qualities of childhood allowed to come to full fruition but learning itself is supported and teaching is more efficient.

In Class 1 we begin developing the child's feeling life and this is where Steiner brings in specific stories at a specific age. When we talk about educating the feeling life we use the stories Steiner suggested as he believed that the stories from different epochs of time reflect the inner feelings of the child and thus the stories mirror the child's feeling and work therapeutically for them at different stages of development.

In Class One fairy tales, myths, or legends are told. Some are fairytales from Europe and the Middle East, some are English folk tales, some are from South East Asia and some are local indigenous stories. The stories we work with to introduce the letters of the alphabet were written by a founding teacher, written specifically for Class 1 with the fairy tale 'mood'.

So why fairytales or myths? What is unique to them? Essentially, they are wonder stories in which anything is possible. We can meet giants, elves, princes and princesses, dragons, animals that can talk, change shape and create the land. Marvelous and magical things can happen. A man can become a bear, a princess can sleep for a hundred years, a frog can drink all the water in the land. Objects can

be enchanted, mirrors can talk, pumpkins can become carriages, a serpent can create the land. From countries as different as Egypt to Iceland similar stories were told. They are archetypal stories and they let us know that humans are beings of development, of struggle, of metamorphosis and behind all the adverse forces, giants, elves etc, there lies the good world that we can all inhabit. These tales are filled with promise, each and every human being can rise to their true potential, we can face obstacles and become all the wiser for these obstacles.

The Class One child can meet this idea of 'anything is possible' without any problem at all because to them anything is possible. Even when they know something is not 'real' they can still inhabit the possibility that maybe it is real. So, the fairy tales/myths speak to this inner world of the child while at the same time leading them through tales of joy, sadness, loss, enchantment, courage, and victory. What a fairy tale/myth expresses is not about one person in a particular situation in life but something universal in human experience that has to do with the truth of humanity. They show us all the different parts of ourselves that make us human. They tell of a journey that speaks to the inner life of the child who instinctively understands the tests undergone by the heroine or hero.

The stories told in class are not merely for entertainment or information, they provide a meaningful context for learning and reflect the children's stage of development. The narratives allow the children to create their own imagery and they respond strongly to the swings of the emotion in the narratives. Behind the stories lies the understanding that these stories have been told in the past by real people and a sense of history develops. The Steiner curriculum is essentially the story of humanity.

One other important picture of the Class 1 child is their relationship with their teacher at this time. The role of the teacher in the child's life is different after the first stage of development. We are now in the age of attachment to authority because the child no longer learns so much through imitation as by inspiration. And so, in this second stage of development from 7-14 the children are ready for a relationship with a teacher who becomes like a mentor to them. In Class 1 you find the young child naturally wants to love their teacher. Many adults remember their first teacher fondly. It is an honored position. We really acknowledge, foster and respect the educational power of this relationship between teacher and child.

In summary, the first seven or so years children see the world as a place of **goodness** and will learn primarily by imitation and through activity. In the next phase they will learn naturally through **beauty**. This is why storytelling and art are employed as teaching vehicles and content is related wherever possible to the human being and to nature that surrounds us. And then entering the third stage teenagers naturally begin a quest for **truth**.