

COMMENTARY ON AND ALTERNATIVES TO “MOVABLE CLASSROOMS” WHERE CHILDREN USE BENCHES AND PILLOWS INSTEAD OF DESKS AND CHAIRS

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We all need to move in order to feel well and stay healthy. The structural aspect of our physical bodies--nerves, muscles and bones--is developed for, and craves, movement. A young child, when awake, can show intense, almost continual movements that gradually become more controlled and efficient. In the growing child chaotic, large movements gradually become more purposeful and goal-oriented. Children's need to move is even stronger than ours as adults. They are developing and myelinating nerve pathways in the central nervous system, and this takes place through movement of all kinds.

If the early years' strong and universal need for large movement (gross motor) has been met, by the time he is about 7 years old, the child is ready to sit at a desk for gradually longer and longer periods of time. Of course, this initially means that sitting at a desk for an hour (or more--poor children!) would be too long. The transition to sitting at a desk in first grade can be challenging for many children, especially the boys. To ease this transition it helps to have them seated for a maximum of 15 minutes to begin with--about as long as they are used to sitting at a table for mealtimes--when that becomes easier, go to 20 minutes, and so on.

“Sitting at a desk” doesn't mean the child isn't doing anything but sitting, of course! The teacher engages the children in many tasks at the desk--playing the recorder, listening to stories, drawing, writing, painting, knitting. Movement is taking place during most of these classroom activities, and first-graders are generally delighted to get to work in their main lesson books--that makes them feel like they are in “real” school.

When children in a class sit at desks facing the teacher and blackboard, an archetypal situation is set up: teacher as authority facing the children who are seated in rows of desks, looking up to the teacher. The children at the desks with the teacher at the front make up the shape of a house: a triangle and square/rectangle. The teacher at the tip of the triangle, the edges of the front row of desks as the other corners of this triangle. The front row is the line delineating triangle from the square/rectangle of the desks.

What often (too often!) happens--that makes sitting at desks so challenging for the first- and second-graders today--is that the desks and chairs are too high for them. The majority of the children's feet can't reach to be planted firmly on the floor, so they wrap them around the chair legs, sit on them, press the toes into the floor or constantly move the feet and legs around. The arms rest on the too-high desktop with a wide angle at the shoulder, thus inviting the head (or even the whole upper body) to rest on the desk or arm(s)--a most uncomfortable position in the long run and not at all conducive to drawing or writing with ease (=with the least amount of tension needed for the task at hand.)

In order to invite proper, comfortable desk posture, efficient pencil grip and ease of learning new skills, I suggest that teachers size desks and chairs to each child's size. This means that you sit each child well back in a chair (ideally there are 3 sizes to choose from, but 2 is fine and 1 can work, too--see guidelines below) in order to find out the proper size.

Individual desks allow each child to sit on a chair and at a desk that fits properly. Where this is not an option, make sure to find desk partners of as similar sizes as possible. Because each child's legs and trunk vary in size, this needs to be measured by sitting them down at the desks on their own chairs (not by lining the children up standing next to each other).

Once the children are seated at their individually sized chairs and desks, they are ready to grasp a pencil, crayon or paintbrush and get to work with tasks according to the curriculum offered by the teacher. For most children it will take little effort to maintain easy posture as long as the expectation to sit there is for a limited time. In first grade, once they have worked for about 15 minutes, it's a good idea to give them a standing-up task, for instance a body geography exercise or a short movement series that gets their heads upside-down, their arms stretched upward, their feet tip-toeing and/or their bodies bending sideways. Then they will be ready to continue the task or take on another task at the desk while again comfortably seated.

For those children who can't manage to sit still for even the 15 minutes, let them do something quiet in the classroom (or outside) that gets them moving for a short time before they get back to their desks. Other options are to have them either sit on a one-legged stool, put a weighted lap-bag on the lap, or place one or two ankle-weights--each of these would be for 10-15 minutes only. Longer than that and the nervous system "tunes out" the anchoring effect of these activities.

Some suggestions for in-class quiet, organizing, anchoring activity: after previously having taught the child how to do each activity, have him stand at the back of the classroom on a small platform or stool/bench with the feet parallel while he does one of the following activities:

--wind up a ball of yarn (in the proper direction, following the body's natural currents: from below up right by the body, then forward away from the body and down--same direction for both right- and left-handers; dominant hand does the winding, non-dominant holds the ball);

--the Wool Winding Exercise;

--the Skein Twisting Exercise;

--the Finger Walking Exercise. (For the latter 3 exercises, see [The Extra Lesson](#))

There are teachers who have successfully used the "movable classroom" idea using desks. I have seen desks and chairs lifted or pushed into formation in such a way that the children can walk up onto a row of chairs, then a row of desks, back down onto a row of chairs, then down and around--all while counting by a table or reciting a lively verse full of images. Wide boards can be used between chairs for balancing on or

placed towards the top of the balance beam in such a way that the children have to walk uphill on them to the balance beam.

The challenge for the teacher is to bring these kinds of lively, large motor activities after the main lesson. This morning lesson is the ideal time, as we know from Rudolf Steiner, for a focus on academic learning. This is best served by beginning, after the morning verse and a song or two, with awakening, “incarnating” activities for a limited time, either in a circle or at the desks, followed by speech work (tongue twisters and poems/verses). Teachers then choose how to arrange the review and new material in rhythmical, predictable fashion, regularly weaving in more movement as indicated above and, of course, artistic activity in support of the offered material.

In an earlier article I have given suggestions for how to individualize during class movement times, and this is another important aspect of how to support children’s incarnation process. The question is: if a few children are unable to follow or learn a certain movement that the rest of the class manages well, how can the teacher give the assistance needed to allow each child to perform the particular exercises? There are several helpful approaches and I give several ideas in the article “How to individualize during classroom movement.”

Here are some tips:

- work with an individual child during a break, spending a maximum of 5 minutes giving images, guiding the child’s motions, all while using as few words as possible;
- back up in the movement sequence to a similar movement that uses less complicated motions and guide the whole class carefully until everyone can do it with ease while speaking (in other words: choose each activity with care and knowledge of what your class can manage);
- when teaching a new activity, teach it in front of the whole class to only a few children and guide each child’s motions carefully, using images and gestures (and few explaining words), repeating this process for a few days until everyone has had the teacher’s attention while the rest of the class learns by watching in this way;

Consider what capacities are foundational to a child’s ability to learn the skills he needs to manage in the classroom: how to hold a pencil with ease, how to sit comfortably at a desk, how to copy from the board, how to write letters or numbers in a straight line, and so on. The capacities or faculties needed to gain these abilities naturally are:

- body geography=an unconscious awareness of the different parts of one’s body and thus the amount of effort needed for each movement task (including the amount of effort for holding a pencil and for sitting comfortably at a desk);
- spatial orientation=an unconscious awareness of the space around one’s body and the body’s relationship to this space (including the writing paper’s 2D space);
- dominance=established preference for one or the other side of the body: especially eye, ear, hand, foot (ideally the dominant writing hand is guided by the eye on the same side);

--bilateral integration=ease of using the two body sides efficiently according to the task at hand (including having the non-dominant hand hold the paper while the dominant hand writes or draws);

--visual capacity to go from far to near vision with ease;

--auditory capacity to distinguish between nearby and background sound sources.

Of course, the abilities and skills learned need time for practice and it is the same for sitting at desks: children need time to practice properly so that these abilities become natural and available as needed according to the situation. We help them practice properly by guiding them through the process of learning the new skill. Once enough time for practice has been given, the ability is imprinted into the etheric body as a habit and is thus available for future use as needed. As all adults know, it is difficult to change an already established habit. Therefore it is helpful to work, as he is learning these skills, on how a child holds a pencil, how a child sits at the desk, how the child hangs up a jacket, how he ties his shoe laces, and so on.

To illustrate, I would like to end this article with a quote by Rudolf Steiner in A Modern Art of Education (the third of lectures given in Ilkley) about movement:

“The development of the body is such that its functions are carried on as though unconsciously. It is only when faculties work unconsciously that they are right; they are reliable only when what I have to do is implanted into the dexterity of my hands and is accomplished of itself, without need for further reflection. When practice has become habit—then I have achieved securely what I have to achieve through my body.”

Appendix:

GUIDELINES FOR FITTING CHAIRS AND DESKS TO THE INDIVIDUAL:

While the child sits well back on the chair seat, observe the line of the thigh when the two feet are fully planted on the floor. For full sitting comfort this line needs to be parallel to the floor OR slightly angled with the knees a bit higher than the hip joints. If there are no chairs that bring the thighs high enough, use a stack of carpet samples masking-taped together or the properly sized wooden support (with glued-on carpet material underneath).

Once this line of the thighs has been accomplished by using the correctly sized chair (or foot support to raise the feet), move the desk up to the seated child and make sure that the arms can rest on the desk with about a 15-20 degree angle in the shoulders--with the forearms resting on the desktop and with both shoulders in comfortable resting positions (not even slightly pulled up toward the ears). If the shoulders are raised or the arms angled out further, lower the desk, making sure that the bottom of the desk “cubby” doesn’t press into the thighs from above. This latter part can be challenging because so many desks’ underneath spaces are too high. Basically, go as far down as you can with the desktop without pressing into the thighs.

The best chairs are those with a gentle curve at the front edge of the seat, so there is no sharp edge pressing into the bottom of the thighs; this would set up a situation of frequently needing to move the legs in order to avoid this pressure.

