

Anthroposophical curative education

Curative Education and Social Therapy Council, www.anthromedia.net

The nature and provision of anthroposophical curative education

Provisions for all children with disabilities

- Early advice and learning
- Curative education kindergardens
- Integrative kindergardens
- Schools for children in need of special care
- Special classes in Waldorf schools
- Integrative Waldorf schools
- Homes and life communities
- Child psychiatry departments in anthroposophical hospitals

Much is on offer also for adults with disabilities, ranging from workshops and residential homes to village communities where life, work, cultural and social life are integrated. The term 'social therapy' is used in this field to characterize the fundamentally different life situation of adults.

The methods of anthroposophical curative education are used to support and care for children with many different kinds and degrees of disability. Individual centres vary in focus, e. g. working specifically with children who have multiple and severe disabilities or children with autism syndrome. To date there are no separate centres for children with sensory disorders; some centres do, however, accept individual children with multiple disabilities who are also blind or unable to hear. The intention to teach children with different kinds of disabilities together - partly also with non-disabled children - and so utilize the positive influence which the children can have on each other's development cannot yet be realized in some countries because of legislation which requires special schools to specialize in particular disabilities.

Curative education as an organism

Essentially, curative education cannot be limited to single, isolated measures. It must always be part of an organism, e.g. a family, a kindergarden or school. Children can only respond in a positive way if they feel that everything that is done relates to their life as a whole. Curative education therefore starts around the children, creating an environment that will sustain and protect them. This applies with all children, and particularly in developmental situations where anxiety and uncertainty arise with regard to bodily experience and life environment. It is thus important to give firm structures to space and time in the curative education organism, e.g. a rhythm of life that sustains the children, on the one hand relieving stress and on the other giving orientation in the progress of time where otherwise confusion may arise. For children, more even than for adults, situations in space and time are never merely external, for they actually live in the soul quality of such things. The images and moods that live in such structures are truly important, therefore, and care taken over the shape given to the day and to the year with its seasons can make these into important biographical elements for the children.

Learning in relationships

Children always learn from their relationships with other people parents and teachers, brothers and sisters and classmates. The teacher-child relationship is often criticized today, yet it continues to be the focal point in all development. The younger the child, the greater his or her responsiveness to all that is offered and all measures taken in the context of a sustainable relationship. This makes great demands on the curative teacher's powers of

empathy. Living experience of the child can however lead to a 'curative education attitude' that will support children individually whilst also providing for their education and upbringing.

Shaping the world the children live in

Giving shape to the world in which the children live and establishing an individual relationship are preconditions for creating a sound basis for the actual curative education measures. Anthroposophical curative education has always been interdisciplinary by nature, its success depending on close collaboration among teachers, therapists and medical advisers and also with the parents. It is essential to make this the basis for the ongoing process of 'healing education'.

With almost all the children, curative education begins by supporting them in taking hold of their own bodies. It is the precondition if they are gradually to feel themselves secure and capable in gaining orientation in their environment and making the world their own. Thus it is not so much a question of adapting the children as early as possible to the demands of modern civilization but rather of helping them to find their own basis in the living body. The more one succeeds in this, the more differentiated, flexible and self-determined will they be in finding their way in life.

Learning in life

To begin with, life itself must provide sufficient opportunities for learning, especially in centres where children are also resident. Aids and learning situations relating to the everyday world will often prove particularly effective where they can be put to immediate practical use; planned and unplanned challenges arise around the house, in the garden, or for example in agriculture, providing new stimuli for development.

Learning at the right age level

All children are taught according to their chronological age in kindergarden and later on very much also in school. The basis for school work is the curriculum and methodology of Waldorf education. Here contents and learning goals are not wholly geared to the demands of society in later life but are also based on their biographical significance for the developing human being. Children with disabilities are therefore essentially taught the same subjects as other children, though in a form adapted to their individual development, also taking account of the therapeutic dimension. Basically, every child must be able to find his or her own point of contact in the lessons that will take them on their own path of learning. Movement, speech, images and exercising memory help them to gain access to their own bodies, to the world, and to other people. One important aim in the teaching is to enable children to experience their own powers of initiative and not merely react to the many events and challenges in life. A bias towards activities and artistic work contributes much to this.

Gaining experience

Children with disabilities tend to come up sooner and more strongly against limitations and resistance than other children do. The encouragement and support they need to overcome these are particularly also given with specific therapies. A range of these is available. With eurythmy therapy, for example, the combination of speech or music with movement can get the children interested in expressing themselves in movement, practising their powers of movement and giving them form, and especially also to make up for imbalances in their movement form. From the curative education point of view, limitations of movement are never merely functional and their influence extends to bodily development, the vital processes and the inner life of the soul.

Curative education is interdisciplinary

Many centres also have their own physician who collaborates in making the curative-education diagnosis, setting the indications for therapeutic measures and in the case of a registered medical practitioner also providing constitutional medical treatment for the child.

The functional and processual work done in a curative-education organism needs a common cognitive basis. Child conferences are at the heart of this. Here the focus is on the biography of the individual child, continuing in the endeavour to understand the child in diagnostic and anthroposophical (study of man) terms and on the basis of this considering how to proceed, being able to take a critical view of one's own actions as teacher and educator, and making changes where necessary.

The meaning of 'disability'

To get away from more negative terms such as 'mentally handicapped', 'only good with his hands' or 'behavioural disorder', anthroposophical curative teachers speak of children, young people and adults as 'in need of special care'. This relates to a number of different levels in the way disability is understood from giving up notions of what it is to be 'normal' all the way to valuing the individual person with his own gifts and disabilities in a life situation which he shares with others. It depends on the form given to such a life situation whether an individual with or without disability finds his place or remains an outsider. In this respect, 'normality is a criterion used by philistines', as Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, put it. The crucial question is what kind of social changes and forms help us to overcome the old-established notion of disability.

The meaning of 'special care'

The 'in need of special care' concept indicates that every individual not only needs to but is also able to develop in body and soul. It is merely that the imbalances that are more or less apparent in all of us are more evident in the case of people with disabilities. The diagnosis made and treatment offered to children in curative education is in response to such individual 'constitutional traits', offering possibilities of making up for imbalances.

People said to be disabled often prove to be individuals with an intensity of life, a will power and social capacity that can leave a deep impression. They make us aware that rather than being a body, the human being has a body with which he seeks to come to terms and which he can make more or less his own, as a musician does with an instrument. Our own life situation is thus not something passive and given, but proves to be an individual orientation given to meaning, a starting point for the task set for us in our biography.

The present-day position of anthroposophical curative education centres

Anthroposophical curative education is considered to be part of the general care provision for people with disabilities. In Germany, as in many other countries, it has the same government support as other independent charitable organizations, enjoying the advantages that result from this and also suffering the same restrictions. From its inception 75 years ago, it has gone through intensive processes of differentiation. It is seen as an evolving methodology, its success depending on achievements gained in individual centres, on its methods being worked with and developed in a living way, and not least also on the kind of people who work in the centres. Anthroposophical centres do not exist in isolation; they have to come to terms with all the internal and external problems and challenges of our time if they are to meet the goal which is to create places where people with disabilities can live a life worth living.

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