Bringing The Alexander Technique to Children In State Schools

By Sue Thame

This is an account of a project that ran from 1979 to 1982, to introduce the Alexander Technique in several schools in Surrey. A number of teachers were involved in different ways, including Shirley Crawford, Michael Gelb, Sophia Gordon Dean, and myself. As a result of the project we learned that while there was useful development for some teachers and children, the main lesson is that it is impossible to take on the state system and effect changes without long term funding and commitment. I make recommendations at the end of this article for those Alexander teachers who want to work with school teachers and children in schools.

This article is a reworking of the talk I gave at the Brighton Congress in a lecture hall that epitomised all the environmental hazards that militate against good use for students at all levels of our education system. The lecture hall had no windows, it was inadequately air-conditioned, the acoustics were not good, the seating was tiered, cramped and ergonomically unsuitable. The lighting was gloomy and the writing surfaces wrongly angled and fixed, so that whatever your size you had to accommodate yourself to them. We found the same problems in all the schools where we worked.

Since the project covered several years and a variety of different kinds of work, this article cannot cover everything that was done. If you are interested in finding out more, please get in touch with those who were involved.

**The First Stage**

In 1979, Jack Vinten Fenton, retired headmaster of two Surrey schools and author of Choice of Habit, about his own work with the Technique in his schools, encouraged the start up of the project. Funded by the Back Pain Association, the aim was to give children basic education in the use of themselves in order to protect them in the long term from back pain. The project was ambitious. Longitudinal studies were envisaged which were actually beyond the available funding. We started with 8-11 year olds. Later we worked with 4-7 year olds.

Sophia, Michael and I began the work—our first step was to spend a lot of time observing the children's use in the class rooms, on the playing fields, in the playground. I took many photos to train my eyes to observe more acutely; our hands were going to play a part only much later on in the project.

None of us were experienced in working with children. We felt inadequate when the time came to start working with the children in small groups and one to one. Nothing in our training as Alexander teachers had prepared us for this. We had to learn as we taught. As a result of our experience with the first group of schools, we recognised that if we were to achieve anything we must win support and greater understanding from the teachers. While the Heads had given us support, the teachers were at best tolerating us.

**The Second Stage**

For the second stage we suggested that we work with younger children, but only with those whose classroom teachers had first had individual lessons in the Technique. With their understanding and support then we could proceed with their classes. The work with the teachers was to be entirely voluntary on their part. Initially all the teachers in the school where I worked had lessons with me, but within a few weeks some had dropped out.

Doubtless for some, the pressure of fitting their lessons with me into the context of a busy school day, in cramped rooms, proved too much. The headmistress commented, "Ah well, it is all my best teachers who are continuing to work with you.". These were the teachers whose horizons were open, who wished to explore, and were prepared to make the considerable effort to find the time to do so.

The teachers demanded that the Alexander work must be relevant to their children. They could not accept that development and change for themselves would bring benefits long-term. They wanted to apply what they learned immediately in practical class room benefits. Since I hadn't been a class room teacher, nor had I raised children myself, this taxed my ingenuity. They wanted materials, resources of books and ideas for games, and ways of managing the class-room in order to incorporate the principles of the Technique into their teaching. Shirley Crawford, formerly a teacher herself, who joined us for this second stage of the project, proved to be a fertile inventor of Alexander-type games.

By a process of joint development we built a programme of activities that led to many practical benefits in the classroom. Perhaps the most popular was the "lying-down" which the children did between the desks once a day. Both teachers and children loved it. A record of the kinds of initiatives that were taken was made on video, in which Shirley, Bridget Belgrave and Ann Baeppler played a significant part. Shirley and I also ran evening classes for teachers to spread the results of the work we were doing.

Throughout the project we found ourselves concentrating on the physical side of the Technique, because immediate tangible results could be demonstrated. The inner processes of the Technique require a long-term orientation which is just not part of the culture of the classroom in state education where the introduction of new approaches is concerned. This demand for "instant" results has been experienced by other innovators into the British State system. For example, the outstanding work of the Israeli educationalist Feuersteinl met with a similar problem—unwillingness on the part of the local educational authorities to invest in depth, over time, however well proven the approach.

With the age range we were dealing with, however, given the stage of development of their consciousness, it is probably not appropriate to emphasise self-awareness and correction of habits, but rather to encourage the teacher to set the example and structure the environment so that bad habits do not develop in the first place. For example, the physical conditions for the learning of reading and writing, the enforced crowding and poorly designed desks and chairs, need to be changed. They promote bad habits from the very early years of a child's life. Of course, that applies as much in the home as in the school.

While the parents were aware of the project, we did not have the funding to spread the message to them directly or do any teaching. In fact, the teachers themselves had to find money out of their own pockets so that we could continue, so keen were they to see the project through. All the teachers gave much of their time without payment. However, it should be a pre-requisite for this kind of work to develop that parents are involved, so that they can support what the children learn at school.

The project finished in 1982. Shirley has stayed in touch with some of the teachers because she lives nearby in Kent. All the teachers we worked with have dispersed to other schools due to the high turnover.

**Recommendations**

If you have a strong mission to promote the Alexander Technique in schools I would suggest these avenues:

1. Encourage individual school teachers to come to you privately and develop ideas with them for applying the Technique in the class room. You could approach the heads of your local schools with information about the Technique and offer to run a demonstration class for those who are interested.

2. As back-up to the classroom work there is a need for published materials, based on the Technique, which help the teacher work with children. For example: simple reading and writing guides; games that teach the principles of primary control, the giving of directions and good use—that are appropriate for different ages; stories that teach the principles of the Technique—we ran a very enjoyable story-writing and drawing project with children in a Redhill First School called Mr Up and Mr Down; anatomy and physiology work-books that encourage the children to think about their own anatomy in terms of good use.

3. There is a need for summer holiday programmes expressly for teachers and for children. Elizabeth Waterhouse, for example, has run many music summer schools for children.

4. Ultimately Alexander Teachers could be thinking of opening their own schools. As the principles of the Technique are not comprehensive enough to base an entire schooling system on them it would be essential to bring together teachers from a variety of disciplines to give sufficient breadth and depth. The Technique could play a significant part in the creation of a new kind of school , of which The Small School in Devon, where the Technique is taught, is a case in point.

**Conclusion**

The experience of my inadequacy in teaching children leads me to suggest that the basic training of an Alexander Teacher should include study of children's development and exploration of teaching methods that are appropriate for them at different ages. You can't just put your hands on and hope. Their understanding has to be won, the lessons must be fun and involve play, and the applications to their lives as children must be made obvious to keep them interested and motivated.

I would say very starkly—"Don't imagine you can change the state system from the outside." You might be able to do something useful if you work full-time as a school-teacher with your own class of children, where you can give daily commitment to changing the environment at all levels, physical, psychological and spiritual. And even then it's doubtful whether you can do that in a state school.

Even Jean Shepherd, who works so successfully as a school teacher using her training as an Alexander teacher, is in a private school.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Reference on Feuerstein: Changing Children's Minds by Howard Sharron, Souvenir Press (1987). Explains Feuerstein's approach to teaching children inhibition so that they can learn to think for themselves in quite a different way from the Alexander Technique. Same principle, different teaching methods. Also describes how different countries have adopted his work. England has been the most ineffective.

On similar ground, my husband, Jerry Rhodes, and I have developed an approach to thinking which has already been recognised as invaluable for developing children's thinking (See The Colours of Your Mind, ISBN 0-00-217690-4). We have decided that the only way to reach children satisfactorily is to bypass the state schooling system and reach them through the commercial sector of public programmes and published materials.

**ABOUT THE WRITER**

Sue Thame started out in journalism, then moved into staff management training in Fleet Street. A spell with the Manpower Services Comission convinced her of her own need to delve more deeply into the mysteries of learning and development. She trained as an Alexander teacher with Walter Carrington, eventually co-founding and directing A.T.A. from 1979-85. She is currently running courses to help people manage stress and awaken creativity, particularly in the area of management training. She and her husband Jerry Rhodes have written a book called The Colours of Your Mind, an approach to managing your thinking style.

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