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The Alexander Principle: A Consideration of its Relevance to Early Childhood Education in England Today

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SUMMARY *The Alexander Technique has many advocates worldwide who stress its value as a means of addressing a range of physical ailments that result from poor posture, whether occupationally derived or habitual in nature. Less well publicised is the preventative dimension that stresses the importance of educating children to acquire better kinaesthetic awareness of balance and body movement. Some aspects of early schooling may have adverse effects on children's posture and the relative ignorance of many teachers about this matter may be a contributory factor. This paper reviews a range of material written about the topic and introduces briefly the theoretical principles underpinning Alexander's teaching. Issues in respect of the curriculum for young children and the awareness that teachers need to have to enable them educate young children about sound body use are flagged.*

RÉSUMÉ *La technique d'Alexander a, dans le monde entier, de nombreux partisans qui insistent sur le fait qu'elle permet de traiter tout un éventail de problèmes physiques dus à de mauvaises habitudes posturales, dont certaines sont acquises en travaillant. Par contre, ce qui est moins connu, ce sont les mesures préventives qui mettent l'accent sur la nécessité d'éduquer les enfants pour qu'ils acquièrent une meilleure conscience de l'équilibre et des mouvements corporels. La vie dans les petites classes peut avoir des effets négatifs sur la posture des enfants et il faut souligner la relative méconnaissance des enseignants dans ce domaine. Cet article passe en revue un ensemble de travaux relatifs à ce sujet et présente une brève introduction sur les principes théoriques de la technique d'Alexander. Il insiste sur certains points relatifs du cursus dans les petites classes et sur la sensibilisation nécessaire des enseignants afin qu'ils puissent éduquer les jeunes enfants à l'écoute de leur corps.*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG *Die Alexander-Technik ist weltweit anerkannt. Besonders geschätzt wird sie bei der Behandlung von körperlichen Beschwerden, die entweder durch beruflich oder gewohnheitsbedingte Haltungsschäden verursacht sind. Weniger bekannt ist die präventive Funktion dieser Technik. Hier steht im Vordergrund, dass Kinder ein besseres kinästhetisches Bewusstsein für Gleichgewicht und körperliche Bewegung erlernen können. Bestimmte Bedingungen in Tageseinrichtungen können die Haltung von Kindern negativ beeinflussen, und das fehlende Wissen seitens der pädagogischen Fachkräfte könnte ein Faktor sein, der dazu beiträgt. Dieser Beitrag stellt die Literatur zur Thematik im Überblick dar und führt kurz in die theoretischen Prinzipien der Alexander-Lehre ein. Mögliche Konsequenzen für Curriculum und Tagesablauf werden thematisiert sowie die Erkenntnisse, die Fachkräfte brauchen, wenn sie Kindern den richtigen Umgang mit ihrem Körper vermitteln wollen.*

RESUMEN *La Técnica Alexander tiene partidarios por todo el mundo que destacan, sobre todo, su valor como método para tratar una variedad de dolencias físicas que resultan de una mala postura, causada por el trabajo o por la postura natural de la persona. Menos conocida es la dimensión preventiva que subraya la importancia de educar a los niños a adquirir un mejor conocimiento de kinestesia, del equilibrio y del movimiento del cuerpo. Algunos aspectos de los primeros años de la enseñanza pueden tener efectos negativos sobre la postura de los niños y la ignorancia relativa de este asunto por parte de muchos profesores puede ser un factor que contribuya al problema. Este artículo examina una variedad de textos sobre el tema e introduce brevemente los principios teóricos que sustentan la propuesta educativa de Alexander. Además se comentan temas relacionados con el currículum escolar y los conocimientos requeridos por los profesores para educar a los niños sobre la buena postura.*

Keywords: Posture; Early schooling, Alexander Technique.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider the extent to which the work of FM Alexander, creator of the Alexander Technique, has implications for approaches to the education of young pupils in English state schools today. Alexander's work began as a process of self-discovery when he tried to overcome a persistent tendency to hoarseness and respiratory trouble that was a particular challenge because of his career as an actor and orator. This was the starting point for the development over many years of a set of principles and a Technique to make them accessible; observations of both his own movements and those of his clients provided his evidence base. Initially his work related to the improvement of specific physical postures but always within a framework that emphasised the significance of the head and neck. Gelb comments:

"Alexander first of all discovered the relationship of his head and neck had immediate consequences for the condition of his larynx and breathing mechanism and then that the Use of his head and neck was the prime factor in co-ordinating the Use of the rest of his organism." (Gelb, 1994 p.42)

However, his findings did not rest solely in the domain of physical activity because he was convinced that it was conscious control of movement that was the key to *good Use*; this led ultimately to the creation of a set of propositions about how individuals should approach their lives in general.

Convinced of the efficacy of his findings, Alexander wrote four key texts about his work, 'Man's Supreme Inheritance' (1910), 'Constructive Conscious Control' (1923), 'The Use of Self' (1932) and 'The Universal Constant of Living' (1941). These set out the principles themselves and described the Technique through which individuals could be brought into conscious awareness of how they could change previously learnt postural behaviours; it is for this that his work is largely remembered nowadays. Far less well known is the fact that he was also expansive about the education of children because he was convinced that what he referred to as *bad Use*, would not occur in the first place if proper attention were paid to enabling them to establish effective kinaesthetic awareness of their bodily movements early on. A major contention of this paper is that current approaches to teaching young pupils in schools in England may do little to facilitate such early learning.

Background information

Alexander, an Australian actor, started teaching his Technique over a hundred years ago; he sought to eliminate habitual but maladjusted body postures and their associated movements as a key to the treatment of a wide range of psychophysical disorders. Initially his pupils came from amongst those engaged in the performing arts in the Melbourne area, but as his reputation grew and his work provided him with new insights into the benefits of the Technique, so did the diversity of backgrounds and interests of his client group increase. Prolonged periods of residence in both London and New York served to secure him a significant niche amongst the rich and famous of the time and he became something of a celebrity figure in his own right.

The list of names cited by exponents of the Alexander Technique to support their view that his work should be taken seriously is impressive: George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, the leading anthropologist Raymond Dart and John Dewey, to name but a few. The 1973 Nobel Laureate in Medicine, Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen, described the benefits he and his family had had from the Technique within his speech of acceptance of the prize. Furthermore, from what was clearly a position of considerable strength, he proposed that Alexander's work was 'scientific' even though Alexander had had no formal training in such methodology. This was considered to be a critical intervention because Alexander's work had not previously been susceptible to sufficient 'scientific' analysis of the formally acceptable kind to enable it be recognised in mainstream medical circles.

Nowadays the Alexander Technique occupies a place at the reputable end of the alternative therapy spectrum; references to the benefits of undertaking tuition in the Technique appear regularly in the media and some private health schemes will pay for the treatment if there are adequate grounds for doing so. However, as with so many of the complementary medicine approaches, the participants have to be prepared to engage in the processes with an open mind and a willingness to invest time and energy on something that has yet to be accepted by the medical profession at large. The consequence of this is that advocates of the Technique may be dismissed as presenting unreliable evidence to back its claims; the very fact of being prepared to become involved in the Technique in the first place may be seen as creating a predisposition to see it as beneficial. Indeed, some of the most significant work recently, Garlick (1990) and Stevens (1995) for example, seeks to provide a scientific explanation through research that builds on current knowledge of physiology and the mechanics of movement that is then applied to the Alexander Technique.

Alexander himself was suspicious of the growth in psychological approaches to medicine that were emerging in the early part of the twentieth century; nevertheless exponents of the Technique stress the holistic nature of its benefits for the individual and Alexander was clear of the significance of the mind/body relationship even if he was not interested in developing a psychological theory to underpin it. Case studies indicate that whilst the majority of clients may go for lessons initially because they hope to improve some physical condition or skill, many will claim general improvements to their psychological well-being too. Alexander teachers engage their pupils in a set of general teaching principles that seek to create better physical balance and poise; this in turn can lead to the reduction, if not elimination, of psychological stresses and tensions that affect individuals' ability to function to their full potential. Essentially, it is proposed that the achievement of outer balance first will lead to the creation of better inner balance, so to speak. This theme, contentious as it may be, runs through all the recent publications about the Technique and is supported by a range of case studies that are used to provide an evidence base; however, as yet no systematic research has occurred to reinforce it; and so it remains merely an interesting proposition at this stage.

The principles underlying the technique

A significant amount has been written about the Technique itself and its guiding principles, wherein the authors are attempting to describe more simply than Alexander himself what the Technique is and how it is relevant to a whole range of activities; however, as Rickover (1988) states, it is "describing the indescribable." (p.17) The underlying message in all the books recognised by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) is that individuals must experience directly the Technique before they can really appreciate it. Jones (1997) writing about his first encounter with the Technique, comments:

"My strongest impressionwas that of a mechanism working against gravity ... I was occupying more space; my movements were less jerky; and I had lost my customary feeling of heaviness. Whatever his procedures were, they had made a radical change in my relation to the gravitational field. The change was not an illusion, since the sensory effect lasted for the rest of the day. It was a new experience which I had neither learned nor willed. There must, I thought, be a mechanism or set of mechanisms already present - a physiological 'a priori', to account for the effect." (p.139)

As a consequence, the literature is unlike that associated with health-related fitness techniques because it avoids any reference to exercises and the like. The central role of the Alexander teacher is to assist pupils through skilled physical guidance to achieve a balanced state that does not create any more tension than is actually required. Most importantly, this state is holistic and not focused on improving one particular aspect of posture without reference to its interconnectedness with everything else. In effect, the Technique develops conscious awareness in the individual of how it feels to be in balance through good Use of self in everyday movement; this in turn increases the sense of psychological well-being.

Alexander devised a technical vocabulary to which pupils are introduced during the tuition process and these are introduced in this paper where it is helpful to do so. The learning outcomes of a course of instruction can be described as the creation of better balance and poise and this is achieved through a process of unlearning habitual postures that have led to what Alexander described as a state of *mechanical disadvantage*. For example, bending from the middle of the back instead of from the pelvis may feel quite natural but is putting undue strain on the spine and the musculature associated with such a movement. Gelb (1994) states: "The Alexander Technique involves a new experience - the experience of gradually freeing oneself from the domination of fixed habits". (p.1).

Literature on the Alexander Technique such as that written by Barlow (1973), Rickover (1988), Jones (1997), Stevens (1996) and Gelb (1994) explain in considerable detail why the majority of human beings do not naturally achieve well-balanced posture because, whatever we might suppose, the upright standing position is not one our bodies are well-designed to meet with ease. Instead we internalise a range of postures that are considered to be appropriate for the positions and actions we are making and these seem quite normal to us and are considered therefore as 'correct'. Careful analysis, e.g. Barlow (1973), Jones (1997), Garlick (1990), Stevens (1995), has been done using a range of medical technology such as x-rays and electrical recordings of muscle tension to show that even the most habitual movements frequently occur with undue tension and *poor use* that places the individual in a position of mechanical disadvantage. In situations where particular movements or postures are used excessively the tension syndrome can lead to a range of medical conditions ranging from severe headaches to frozen shoulders and of course, various forms of backache, some of which can be totally incapacitating. Barlow (1973), who approached Alexander's

work from an expert medical perspective, goes into considerable detail about faulty muscular tension (dystonia) and wrote:

"Dystonic patterns arise and produce unbalanced resting-state in many ways. They are particularly obvious in the positionings and postures which we adopt when we are keeping still. Over one thousand such body positions have been listed, all of them variations of sitting and lying and standing and kneeling.... Dystonic patterns also arise in the simple mechanical actions we carry out all day and every day when we move ourselves and objects in our surroundingsDystonic mis-uses appear when we walk and run; when we jump, hurdle, swim, throw, dance;... when we lift a dish or a dictionary from a shelf; when we stand at a bar or in a shop or at a football match; when we carry out surgical operations or laboratory work or dentistry: when we work manually in industry or agriculture or just in the garden. In all of these, and many more, our performance and our liability to fatigue is bound to be influenced by our manner-of-use." (p.49)

A fundamental principle of the Alexander Technique arises from this, namely that individuals need to learn to exercise conscious direction of movement to facilitate good Use. It is suggested that without this individuals are not able to make correct judgements about the quality of their postures and movements because of *unreliable sensory appreciation*. For example, individuals may believe they are standing straight whereas in reality they have developed a habitual posture that is more 'stooped' than upright. The situation is exacerbated if the individual tries to stand up straight by making a conscious effort to do so because, once again, unreliable sensory appreciation will send back inaccurate messages about what is actually happening. Alexander gave an example of this when describing one of his clients, a young girl who had been unable to walk properly for some time:

"A little girl who had been unable to walk properly for some years was brought to the writer for a diagnosis of the defects in the use of the psycho-physical mechanisms which were responsible for her more or less crippled state. When this had been done, a request was made that a demonstration should be given to those present of the manipulative side of the work (the child, of course, to be the subject to be manipulated), so that certain readjustments and co-ordinations might be temporarily secured, thus showing, in keeping with the diagnosis, the possibilities of re-education on a general basis in a case of this kind. The demonstration was successful from this point of view. For the time being the child's body was comparatively straightened out, that is, without the extreme twists and distortions that had been so noticeable when she came into the room. When this was done, the little girl looked across at her mother and said to her in an indescribable tone, " Oh! Mummie, he's pulled me out of shape."

Here indeed, is food for reflection for all who are concerned in any attempt to eradicate psycho-physical defects! In accordance with this poor little girl's judgement, her crookedness was straightness, her sensory appreciation of her "out of shape" condition was that it was 'in shape'. Imagine, then, what would be the result of her trying to get anything 'right' by doing something herself, as she had always tried and had always been urged to try to do, whilst practising remedial exercises according to the directions and under the guidance of a teacher. Small wonder that all attempts to teach her had resulted in failure." (Alexander 1969a p.17)

Another important principle stresses the significance of concentrating on what is termed *the means whereby* as opposed to *endgaining*. Gelb (1994) comments:

"Alexander always emphasised the 'process' of attaining his goal, rather than a narrow focus on the goal itself, an approach that differs from that ordinarily taken in dealing with the material world. We all know that the way to drive a nail into a piece of wood is to hit it directly on the head. The problem starts when we apply this kind of thinking to ourselves, particularly when we are trying to bring about some kind of change....

Each of us is so complex that we must carefully reason the means we employ to reach any goal. Alexander found that most of us let our immediate goals dominate the field of our attention; he called it 'endgaining' or the 'one brain track' method." (p.80)

Underlying the principle is the belief that concentrating only upon endgaining may produce results but often at the cost of sacrificing poise. The stressed lifestyle of many individuals in adulthood is cited as an example of too much emphasis being placed on achievement without proper consideration of the means whereby such goals are reached and whether they are worthwhile or not. In terms of posture, the pressure to achieve an end may result in a distorted body alignment occurring; repetitive strain syndrome is a clear example of this.

Books written by Alexander himself describe his journey of self-discovery and the principles and Technique he created to help his pupils achieve conscious control of their own movements. It includes many examples of individual cases to reinforce the points he is trying to make. However, frequently his writing presents assertions more than evidence and he does not confine his words to the principles and the Technique alone. Instead, he used it as a basis for introducing what he considered to be the wider implications of his findings both for and about society at large. His publications provided a platform from which to issue scathing criticisms of the medical profession and about many aspects of the educational system of his day. Unfortunately, in so doing he did little to attract the very circles that could have given his work professional recognition. As J McVicker Hunt states in his introduction to Jones (1997) 'Freedom to Change: The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique':

"Although FM Alexander wrote in captivating fashion about the Technique, his words as such seldom elicited faith in its efficacy and validity. It was undoubtedly his demonstrations of the dramatic experience of kinaesthetic lightness coupled with relief from distressful symptoms of misuse in those who learned through lessons to achieve 'primary control' voluntarily, that convinced such figures as Sir Stafford Cripps, John Dewey, Aldous Huxley, James Harvey Robinson and Bernard Shaw of its validity." (p.xi)

As a result there have been considered efforts to provide the 'scientific' evidence to support Alexander's work; key contributors have been Barlow (1973) , Jones (1997), Garlick (1990) and Stevens (1995). Each of these writer/researchers present clinical evidence to support their case that there is proof that physical changes do occur in individuals' balance and body control as a result of the Technique and go into detail about what they consider to be the physiological mechanisms underpinning the principles of the Alexander Technique. Interestingly, the use of electromyograms to register changes in muscle responses as a result of exercising conscious control are included. Seen in conjunction with more recent research evidence, including that presented by Dave Smith at the British Psychological Society's conference in Brighton (1998), in which he demonstrated that merely 'thinking' a physical activity resulted in considerable improvement in the tone of the muscles associated with it, the scientific base that eluded Alexander may well become established as 'fact' eventually.

The Alexander Principle in relationship to the education of children in school

As stated earlier the particular focus of this paper is to consider an issue that has been less well rehearsed, namely the implications of the principles underlying the Technique for the educational system. John Dewey was a powerful advocate of Alexander's work not just because of its remedial dimension but because he believed it had serious implications for the educational system. He wrote three prefaces to books written by Alexander, and within the introduction to Alexander's second book, 'Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual' he stated:

"The discovery could not have been made and the method or procedure perfected except by the dealing with adults who were badly co-ordinated. But the method is not one of remedy, it is one of constructive education. Its proper field of application is with the young, with the growing generation, in order that it may come to possess as early as possible in life a correct standard of sensory appreciation and self-judgement. When once a reasonably adequate part of a new generation has become properly co-ordinated, we shall have assurance for the first time that men and women in the future will be able to stand on their own feet, equipped with satisfactory psycho-physical equilibrium, to meet with readiness, confidence and happiness instead of with fear, confusion and discontent, the buffetings and contingencies of their surroundings." (Dewey, 1969 p.179)

Dewey's view was in accord with that of Alexander himself who was very convinced that prevention was better than cure and that early childhood education, both at home and in school, was a powerful determinant of whether individuals developed good Use of themselves. Alexander focused directly on the education of the young in a section on 'Child Training and Education', included in his second book 'Constructive Conscious Control'. Alexander's writing on this topic displays insights into why his principles are relevant to children, but within a plethora of assertions and opinions about the educational system and child-rearing practices of his day. Many of these can be dismissed as very limited explanations of child development in the light of more recent evidence about how children learn, and Dewey himself in his introduction to the book felt obliged to remark that "in this country Mr Alexander has made the acquaintance of an extremely rare type of 'self-expressive school'" (Dewey, 1969 p.171), to counter the scathing attack that Alexander made upon the 'Free Expression' school of thought. Notwithstanding this, there are a number of comments, particularly in relationship to activities such as writing, that remain pertinent today. For example:

"Any attentive and thoughtful observer who will watch the movement and position of these children's fingers, hand, wrist, arm, neck and body generally, during the varying attempts to draw straight or crooked lines, cannot fail to note the lack of co-ordination between these parts ... But the children I saw commonly sat or stood in the position of worst mechanical advantage, and the manner in which they held their pencils or their tools demonstrated very clearly that until their management of such instruments was corrected, they could never hope to produce anything but the most clumsy results." (Alexander, 1969b p.102)

His view of the pupils' teachers was that they were "entirely ignorant of the ideal physical conditions that are proper to children ..." (Ibid., p.101)

In some respects his views have been likened to that of Froebel because of the analogy he drew between the role of the teacher of young children and that of a gardener:

"The gardener does indeed train the young growth. He draws it out to the light and warmth and leads it into conditions most helpful for its development.

And so in teaching, the first essential should be to cultivate the uses of mind and body, and not, as is often the case, to neglect the instrument of thought and reason by the inculcation of fixed rules which have never been examined." (Ibid., p.107)

Indeed it is interesting to note also that one of Alexander's advocates was an early Principal of the Froebel College, Esther Lawrence.

Alexander did not confine his views merely to paper but actually established a school for children aged between three and eight in London in 1924. Irene Tasker, a qualified Montessori teacher, was in charge for the first ten years and she established a curriculum that stressed the importance of encouraging children to maintain good Use of themselves whilst being taught the conventional infant curriculum of the time. After Tasker departed, the school continued for a further six years with Margaret Goldie as teacher; in 1940 the school was evacuated to the United States of America but never returned after the war ended.

Gelb (1994) includes a whole chapter 'Education for Use' (pp.111-125) in which he discusses both the rationale for introducing the Alexander principles into the educational system and identifies examples of practice to date. Gelb contrasts the external control systems associated with the traditional subject-focused curriculum with those he considers to be vital if effective 'progressive' methodologies are to be employed, and in relating his perspective to that of Dewey he comments:

"As Dewey pointed out, the progressive approach is much more difficult to implement than the traditional one. It is less mechanistic and requires more adaptability and creativity on the part of the teachers. Dewey recognised that the gap between progressive theory and practice could be traced to the confusion between external and internal freedoms and that numerous attempts at innovation had failed because discipline and order, which had been previously imposed by the system, were simply rejected outright... The progressive teacher must find a way of developing, in both herself and her pupils, the inner freedom that is an essential part of her work. Because inner freedom finds its expression in self-discipline it obviates the need for the gross imposition of discipline and order...it is possible for an individual to begin to explore the meaning of inner freedom....

The Alexander Technique is one practical method by which this exploration can begin." (Gelb, 1994 p.112)

It is evident from the review of the literature that there are pockets of activity not only in the UK but elsewhere, including the USA, Australia and Denmark, where attempts are being made to introduce the Alexander principles to young children; however, there is little that could be described as 'researched' in respect of application. Gelb (1994) cites the work of some of the early pioneers, including that of Irene Tasker and Margaret Goldie in relationship to their involvement with Alexander's own school, and one is impressed by the extent to which their ideas and approaches to the children tied in closely with the underlying principles that informed much of the emerging concept of good early childhood educational practice in the 1920s and 30s. It is clear that the attraction of Alexander's work was not so much that it provided a means of enabling children to establish outward balance and poise, although this was important, but more that it had deeper implications for the children's overall development. Undoubtedly, the principles underlying the Alexander Technique were considered to complement the holistic and child-centred views of education prevalent at the time.

More recently, the work and ideas of Alexander teachers who have been working with children have been published in a number of pamphlets by the Society

of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT). In terms of presenting a philosophical stance alongside examples of working in practice with children in school, one pamphlet (entitled 'An Alexander Teacher's View of Child Education: An Interview with Grethe Laub' produced in 1984 by the Boston Center for the Alexander Technique) provides a useful insight into the way in which Laub, a Danish Froebel trained teacher, was able to make links between her approaches to young children in general and the principles underlying the Alexander Technique. However, Laub did not agree with Alexander's view that young children should be taught the Alexander Technique directly but rather that it should inform indirectly the interactions and activities that occur. She says:

"I think the Alexander Technique really demands something in an intellectual way. But the children, the little ones, they lap it up even if they don't understand it intellectually because they love the way you can 'play' it into them." (Boston Center for the Alexander Technique, 1984 p.47)

This point of view was reiterated by Brigdet Belgrave in a talk entitled 'The Home as a Learning Environment' that she presented at the Alexander Teachers International Congress in 1988 (STAT 1988).

Apart from the ideological stance evident in the ideas presented above, there has been interest in exploring the ways in which educational practice can impact upon children's psycho-physical development. Rickover (1988) and Gelb (1994) both include an extract from an unpublished MSc thesis by Ann Matthews, a New York City teacher of the Alexander Technique, entitled 'Implications for Education in the work of FM Alexander' and written in 1984. Matthews' work involved observation of pupils in school and interactions with their teachers; she noted that routine classroom practice often contrived to develop 'bad Use' rather than discourage it. She writes:

"A teacher calls her six- and seven-year olds to gather round her on the floor and listen to a story. Most sit cross-legged with their spines collapsed into a curve and their heads pulled back onto their necks as they look up at the teacher. One boy is kneeling close to the teacher, back beautifully aligned, head balancing on top. 'Thomas, you are blocking the people behind you' says the teacher in a reproachful tone. 'Sit down so they can see the pictures.' The child sits down obediently and collapses like the others around him. The teacher does not see ... she has required the child to go from a poised, balanced, alert position, to one that is cramped and distorted. Knowing better than to protest, the child looks resigned." (cited in Rickover, p.101 and Gelb, p.124)

In practice, efforts to introduce the Alexander Technique into state schools in England have been limited, particularly in respect of published material arising from such insights. There are a number of reasons for this, including the need for expert assistance from a trained Alexander teacher and resistance from teachers to the significance of the principles underlying the Technique, not so much because they are not acknowledged as important but either because it is rather low down on their list of priorities and also because there is a dearth of material that actually addresses the issue of how it should be approached as opposed to why it should be introduced. Latterly, the legal position relating to whether it is permissible for teachers to touch pupils has added a further complication since the Alexander Technique does involve physical contact, albeit of a highly professionally-controlled nature. The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique has instigated steps recently to formalise the position and issue guidelines to its teachers about acceptable procedures when working with children in school.

The one significant input that has led to publication (Fenton 1973) details the way in which direct intervention in schooling became the focal point of two projects and a piece of research by Jack Vintem Fenton. As headteacher of Woodhatch Primary school in Reigate, Fenton introduced a six-month project on posture; this included giving individual attention to certain children with particular postural difficulties, namely,

"four boys with poor co-ordination and asthma, an older boy (a stammerer) with remarkable over-tenseness throughout his body, and a very awkward and dreamy girl who had an unusually hollow back." (Fenton 1973 p.62)

The teachers were given staff development to enable them to observe more effectively the examples of 'bad Use' that they found to be prevalent.

Even at a relatively young age the pupils were displaying poor sensory appreciation and there is a particularly pertinent photograph (Fenton, 1973 plate 23a) that illustrates the low achievement of accuracy that a class of pupils in the infant school demonstrated when instructed to raise their arms so that they were level with their shoulders. This is linked to a picture of secondary pupils responding to the same instruction, and here the mismatch between what the pupils 'felt' was right and where they actually placed their outstretched arms is even more pronounced. Overall, Fenton considered all the pupils to have benefited from the project and concluded that the children selected for particular attention had gained very considerably indeed.

A similar project was carried out in a large secondary school in the same area and here the Technique was introduced to over two hundred boys and girls in year 8. Apart from building upon experiences learnt during the primary project, a specialist Alexander teacher was involved too. During the project this meant two days a week on site; the Alexander teacher provided the staff development for the teachers and also visited pupils in their classrooms and was able to make direct input into addressing ways in which particular activities might be better 'managed' physically. When the teachers came to evaluate the project they believed that the staff development had enabled them to better recognise degrees of unnecessary tension that would have previously escaped their notice. From the pupils' point of view it appeared that because they were made aware of posture and it had become a focal issue they were more likely to consider its significance in future.

Fenton also describes a research project he undertook in which he attempted to determine the main ways in which children of different age groups (five to eighteen years) "naturally and habitually chose the most economical position and method of use" (Fenton, 1973 p.11). The sample covered about 1000 pupils in England and Wales and was conducted by means of a questionnaire that teachers were asked to complete. To assist them a sheet depicting a range of possible postures associated with, for example, position of the head, standing and seated writing, was supplied. Teachers were asked to make their observations when the pupils were 'unposed' in order to be able to make judgements about habitual rather than considered stance. On the basis of the response to the questionnaires, and it would appear from the tables that this was good, ranging from 924 observations of pushing activity to 1057 of seated writing. Fenton was able to deduce that there was significant evidence of poor use, particularly in respect of seated writing where 65% of the sample were reported as not displaying sound body mechanics. 66% were lifting heavy objects and 50% carrying objects poorly and all the other postures upon which teachers were asked to comment indicated a significant proportion of poor Use in evidence. Fenton points out too that the teachers were not necessarily skilled in making such observations so that they might only have noted the more gross examples; in other words the percentage of misuse could well have been higher. Of particular note was the early age at which children were identified as not showing sound body mechanics:

"Two of the teachers who completed the questionnaire, although not specialists in the sense that they were trained to correct faulty posture, had had some experience of observing children, with guidance, and so were more discerning in placing children in the various categories. When their observations were compared with others relating to the six and seven year old age groups, they indicated that 'in all cases much lower percentages of children choosing the better positions' was in evidence." (Fenton, 1973 p.18).

One of Fenton's conclusions was that,

"these figures do show that a quite significant percentage of our children do not spontaneously and naturally perform in the best way, and that there is a sound case for teachers taking action to try and help them to do so." (Fenton, 1973 p.18)

Following on from this initiative, a small team of Alexander Teachers was encouraged to undertake a project in Surrey funded by the Back Pain Association; it ran from 1979 to 1982; the Alexander Teachers observed the pupils extensively and worked with the teachers too. The skilled observation of teachers and pupils identified a number of disturbing trends that were reported initially in a pamphlet published by the Society for Teachers of the Alexander Technique in 1984. It was noted that,

"children's postural integration deteriorated markedly as they grew older. Nursery children looked very different in movement from 7 year olds who in turn looked very different from 11 year olds" (STAT, 1984)

and that there was a "very poor postural approach by children to reading, writing, singing and speaking." (Ibid) There were comments too about the "extreme stress i.e. noise and restricted space and continuous physical contact" (Ibid) under which the teachers had to work. The project led to the introduction of a programme of practical activities that were classroom based and considered by the teachers to be relevant to the children's needs.

One of the Alexander teachers involved, Sue Thame, addressed the Alexander Teachers International Congress in 1988 about the project. She observed:

"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 inner orientation which is just not part of the culture of the classroom in state education.... The demand for 'instant' results has been experienced by other innovators into the British State system." (STAT, 1988: 'Bringing the Alexander Technique to Children in State Schools')

Thame considered that "it is impossible to take on the state system and effect changes without long term funding and commitment." (Ibid) Indeed her advice to the Congress was rather daunting in that she considered that the only effective way would be to "to 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." (Ibid)

Within the last few years there have been further attempts to introduce the Technique into state schools and this was the subject of a report in the Times Educational Supplement (1994) entitled 'Get 'em young and they're upright for life'. Francesca Wolf described several projects undertaken in state schools in the London area including the one involving Thame. She also commented on the teaching strategies introduced by Sue Merry to classes of children at Latchmere Infant School in Kingston-upon-Thames. It is in the context of finding ways of making the Alexander

principle accessible to young children that Merry has had a significant contribution to make. She has developed a range of materials including a 'Starter Pack' for Alexander Teachers wishing to work with young children in school and is in the process of writing a book about how she approaches the 3-8 year old children whom she continues to teach on a weekly basis. Her ideas draw upon the kind of approaches used by teachers to engage the interest and involvement of young children, such as stories, games and action rhymes; these help to bring the children into conscious awareness of their body movements and to understand their ability to control them by directed thinking. In addition, the children are taught how to relax effectively and to appreciate the difference between over-tension and required tension when undertaking particular movements.

Currently, a small scale research project is being conducted at Leeds Metropolitan University involving eight final-year students training to teach children in the 3-8 age range in England. The students are participating in a series of workshops conducted by a qualified Alexander teacher; these are designed not only to help them understand the basic principles but also to try to apply them diagnostically, when observing children's 'Use' in school. Where appropriate they are being encouraged to introduce specific activities intended to help the children establish conscious awareness of 'good Use'. All the students are working with children aged between 5 to 7 and there are early indications that they are discerning examples of 'poor Use', particularly but not only, in relationship to classroom practice associated with the introduction of the 'Literacy Hour'. The students have been asked to complete a questionnaire after a one week attachment in the classes in which they will undertake their final teaching practice placement in the following term. One comment, typical of others, states, "...the children got restless and tended to sit 'crunched' up; cross-legged, arched back, leaning over knees, arms supporting head" and another wrote: "shared reading 15 minutes and word level work is 15 minutes. Most children sat on the carpet for this long period of time."

At this stage it is predominantly the cramped conditions of the classrooms and the length of time in sitting positions that the students are commenting upon but these are being expressed quite precisely in terms of the *postural signals* the children are giving. This provides an interesting - if incidental perspective - on why 50% of infant teachers considered classroom size to be of equal or of greater significance to class size when asked to reflect upon conditions that affected their teaching (Hall & Nuttall in publication).

The students will be asked to provide further insights into the ways in which their knowledge about 'good Use' has influenced decisions they make or would make if they were able to do so, about how they would organise their classrooms and deliver the curriculum. They will each participate in an in-school tutorial with their Alexander teacher so that there is an opportunity to verify the specific observations they are making whilst working with their classes. The extent to which they are able to discern postural indicators of a more subtle nature that reflect the children's perceptions of success or otherwise in achieving the goals set for them will be noted. Already one student has written,

"Whenever the teacher said she was going to give a sticker out, the children would immediately sit up straight with their arms folded as they obviously thought this would please her. Most children, when they realised they would not get a sticker, collapsed back down again."

The outcomes of the project will be presented fully in 1999 when the data collected during the block teaching practice has been analysed and there is more evidence upon which to base the conclusions made.

Conclusion

The review of the work of Alexander and its impact on the educational system gives rise to a number of issues that need considering. There is telling evidence that the working environment and expectations of pupils in schools in England may affect adversely children's development of sound body use, such as children sitting at tables and upon chairs not well designed for their size or the activities in which they are engaged. Fine motor skill learning may be occurring too soon for some children so that poor Use is developed, and too much emphasis on 'product' may be leading to subconscious connections being made between anxiety and particular positioning of the body such as overtensing of shoulders, arms and the spine. This is associated with the psychophysical dimension where anxiety becomes locked into particular postures that are then repeated over and over again so that the link becomes habitual. The introduction of the Literacy 'hour' from the Reception class onwards is not likely to be conducive to ensuring that young children are able to move around as freely as they might do under a less pressurised regime. This is particularly pertinent in England where formal schooling for children is introduced at an earlier age than occurs in other European countries. In this context the contrast that Gelb makes between the Alexander principles and education goals set early on for children in England is worth noting:

"The Alexander approach to education is to encourage the development of self-awareness and responsibility through attention to the means whereby. The present education system seems to work against this. Children are sent to school shortly after they begin to develop an independent ego or 'I'. The transaction from the instinctive world of infancy to the emerging consciousness of childhood is crucial for the development of the individual. Yet at school children are subject to enormous pressure. We demand that they sit for much of the day; we emphasise achievement in reading and writing and in mathematics without paying enough attention to how children are using themselves in these activities. We look for results rather than successes. In this way we teach them to become endgainers.... Indeed, just by requiring children to write we are providing a stimulus which can, and usually does, distort their co-ordination. Writing is a complex skill and, unlike speaking, it is not instinctive. It has to be consciously learned.... the image of a child hunched over his desk, tongue protruding and fingers gripping the pencil or crayon is familiar to everyone. Indeed one teacher in the Surrey project reported that she found impressions from a child's writing through twenty pages of his pad. Imagine the tension behind that pen." (Gelb, 1994 p.123)

There is also the issue that many teachers are not sufficiently skilled to note anything other than gross physical distortion occurring in their pupils because it requires an expert eye to detect it. Whilst children may be advised on how to hold a pencil, for example, the focus tends to be on the hand itself rather than the effect on the whole body alignment. Even in relatively unstressed situations pupils may position themselves adversely; the impact of the computer upon the posture of young children could well be a matter of concern. Furthermore, the matter of the teacher's own poor Use has been noted and whilst teachers of young children may be advised to sit down with their pupils rather than bend down to them, trying to move around quickly from one child to another may make this very difficult to achieve. However, all this is tending to focus on what teachers need to mediate as they negotiate the curriculum they are required to deliver and the variable levels of adaptability to it that they will find amongst their pupils.

At a more proactive level there may be potential opportunities for teachers to become more directly instrumental in promoting sound body learning much as the

Alexander teachers mentioned in this paper have tried to do. Children appear to internalise well the lessons they have learnt and if such initiatives can ultimately help to reduce the number of postural problems that occur in adulthood, it will have been an investment worth making. It is only a few weeks ago that the medical profession in England was declared as at a loss to know how to respond adequately to the range of back-related ailments with which it has to deal.

Some of the contentions Alexander and his supporters made about the very substance of education, and how the introduction of the Alexander principles into schools could make a significant difference to the quality of society, fall clearly within the realms of belief rather than fact, but as Gelb (1994) noted:

"Much of the most important explanation of why Alexander's work lacked general acceptance lies in the fact that it was - and to a great extent still is - decades ahead of its time.... The Technique demands a fundamental revision in the way the individual thinks about himself, and if it is to be accepted within society an even more fundamental collective revision of attitudes by doctors, psychologists and teachers among many others, will be necessary." (p.21)

The very fact that the Alexander's work remains a topic for serious consideration after such a long time suggests that it may indeed prove to have an important contribution to make to society ultimately. Clearly a robust evidence base would be required in order to assess the medium and long-term benefits of introducing the principles into the classroom more systematically than has been the case to date. At a relatively superficial level this might at least help to address some of the concerns about physical development that have been touched upon in this paper but it would also present an opportunity to assess the deeper levels of well-being that could accrue to the pupils who have been educated to be more kinaesthetically in tune with their inner self.

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