

“The hard way is the best way. Not because it’s the best way, but because it is the hard way.”

by Jeff Tunkey

I ended my school teaching career in the spring of 2020. (Retirement can be fun once you adjust!) But hopefully my book will stay at work as a resource and inspiration for teachers and schools. I wrote it in an attempt to distill and graphically organize everything I learned from working with hundreds and hundreds of amazing and wonderful mentors, colleagues, children and parents. And, from reading a large bookcase of anthroposophic and “modern” material on human development and education.

But there’s one guiding idea I forgot to include in the book: why the hard way is the best way - *because* it’s the hard way. I can’t remember how or when I first heard this phrase. It’s often used by athletes to encourage good training habits: run your wind sprints uphill, not down; do your crunches slowly because that’s harder but you gain more. In a few of my workshops I’d spoken about this motivational motto and how it helped me keep a focus on my professional goals in the realms in which I worked for some 30 years: Extra Lesson/educational support; and movement education.

A general aspect of teaching “the hard way”

During my Spacial Dynamics training, Jaimen McMillan offered the maxim that “if you want to know what you’re teaching, look to the bottom third of your class.” This points to an aspect of human frailty that is probably universal to all teachers (and certainly not just Waldorf teachers), more or less, at least some of the time, and in any subject. And that is: it’s tempting to bask in the reflected glory of the most thriving, highest achieving in one’s class and have nice warm feelings about oneself as a professional.¹ Reality check: the most thriving, highest achieving kinda don’t need you very much; a few quick pointers in the right direction and they’re off to the races. And while the middle third of your class does need your instruction, it’s also helped along quite a bit by the top third. So the hardest work is tamping down that ego involvement and figuring out how to keep your lessons challenging and engaging for all, but also carefully and objectively assessing and meeting the needs of the bottom third.

Student Support “the hard way”

The Extra Lesson model, a vital part of a broader Waldorf student support program, asks prospective practitioners to set aside linear-sequential thinking and instead take it on faith that the particular methods described by Audrey McAllen – certain movements, certain drawings, and certain paintings, in a certain order and rhythm – will lift many a student up from developmental/academic difficulties. But *only* if you do the spirals in specified directions and progressions, the paintings (in many cases) with carefully specified colors, the drawings with the right size paper, etc.

¹For a deeper look at this dilemma, see Rudolf Steiner, “Facing Karma”, lecture of Feb. 8, 1912

Well, here are just a few of the things that are “the hard way” about the above. First, following this model is going to require an immense amount of patience, trust, and perseverance. In most cases, student change will probably not be apparent over weeks or a few months, but over semesters or even years. Dedication and discipline, to say the least. Second, the ways and means of Extra Lesson are far from easy to explain to colleagues and parents, whose support and sharing in patience is going to be a requisite. (Oh, and Audrey McAllen wrote her book at a time when, apparently, her readers would comprehend the deeper reasons for all of these particulars without much need for her to articulate them.²) Third, not all learning problems can be addressed by the Extra Lesson, or by the Extra Lesson alone; thus, care must be taken to objectively discern when it’s time to refer for other modalities. For instance, not every delayed reader is developmentally “waiting for the light to come on” in third or fourth grade – the root problem may be one, such as dyslexia or a physical/medical issue, requiring other modes of intervention (and often, outside of school time). Fourth, and especially in our modern times, the Extra Lesson teacher will experience external pressure (or internal temptation) to try seemingly quicker fixes like rote tutoring, or easier outs like the many popularized plug-and-play remedial activities readily to be found online. And finally for this tip-of-the-iceberg list of hard things, Extra Lesson teachers are expected to be (and should be) beacons in their school for objective observation of deeper aspects in child development like constitutional types, learning styles, temperaments, sensory organization, and all else that flows from Rudolf Steiner’s curative lectures. Hard, hard work with complexities beyond compare.

Steiner time and again enjoined his audiences to hear him out and then to do their own research - both spiritual and practical. Thus, out of respect for the anthroposophic heritage but with an open mind, I began my Waldorf career in 1992 deciding to stick to the "recipe" described by Audrey McAllen and hope for the best. Now I can look back and feel like this was the right path for me and that her guidance for helping children is “the best” in the long run. So, for emphasis, I continue to advocate staying as close as one can in modern times to the precepts described by McAllen, Steiner, König and others from the early years... not out of an unquestioning belief, but now based on my own practical research and experience. So, the bad news is, it takes a mountain of contemplation and research. The good news is, it takes a mountain of contemplation and research!

I experienced that the Extra Lesson approach, followed as well as I could, produced very good results in most cases, lead to better insights for further modalities in the other cases, and in any event did the least harm in terms of burdening young students with self-definitions of inherent shortcomings. This is because it seeks and can address developmental aspects that may lay much deeper than the academic “problem” that manifests at the surface. So here again, doing it the hard way built muscles I never knew I could have.

² But fortunately, there is now a book that goes into excellent detail: Joep Eikenboom, *Foundations of the Extra Lesson - Beyond What Is Seen in the Exercises*, Rudolf Steiner College Press, Fair Oaks, CA, 2007

Movement Education “the hard way”

As you can see in my book, I’m a big advocate of digging deeper and including strong components of rough and tumble play and of recreational gymnastics through the grades. Since neither of these are now commonly taught in teachers’ colleges, and probably were not even part of today’s teachers’ own grade-school experiences, a whole new realm of curriculum study and practice might be needed. (I’m forever grateful that my time in Spacial Dynamics provided this background!) In addition to activity skills knowledge, both rough and tumble and gymnastics require a high level of light-hearted but clear and firm classroom management in order to create and maintain safe and fun experiences for students.

Secondly, I advocate that athletic skills development in the lower grades flow out of the movement foundations inherent in traditional childhood games, rather than from direct instruction in team sport rules and skill sets. What’s hard about this is that program design needs to be carefully thought through backwards, i.e., “If I want to start volleyball in grade 6, then we’ll do Newcombe in grade 5, Fireball in grades 3 & 4, simple underhand tossing/catching games in 1 & 2,” and so on. These program elements are definitely part of “the hard way” – but I’ve had many parents and students let me know that this progressive program in Grades 1 to 8 really did help build foundations for athletic successes in high school. The graph on page 57 of *Educating for Balance and Resilience* depicts the basics of my approach.

Everything about Waldorf Education is “the hard way”

All of the above duties and challenges pale in comparison to the ultra-marathon of the Waldorf class teacher who, doing it the really hard way, prepares and personally delivers new lesson block after new lesson block, month after month and year after year, and then (ideally) 8 year cycle after 8 year cycle; who strives to become adequately knowledgeable in literacy, history, science, math, drama and more, so that students see how hard work pays off. But I repeat, that’s the best way, because reaching for teaching beyond your own imagined limits will always be perceived by and have an effect on students and parents.