

Aller Anfang ist leicht - 'Beginning is Easy'

Teaching the Alexander Technique at an Austrian elementary school

Alexandra Mazek

This article is about the project's aims, methodology, results and evaluation. Since we often learn from mistakes, I am not going to present a polished picture, but only a report.

RESUME OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

For three months of the academic year 2004-2005 a team of Alexander Technique teachers led ten sessions of 1.5 to 2 hours to a third-year class of an elementary school. The class teachers received four individual lessons, and they were present throughout the sessions with the children. Regular reports were sent to the parents. In addition, two *jour-fixe* dates were held to keep them informed. Afterwards the results were evaluated, the concept was improved and carried out in another class of the same school, this time with a first year class. We published successful games and methods in a brochure and presented the project and its results to Austrian schoolteachers within the scope of their professional development program.

The project goals as formulated in the project application were:

- 1 prevention of posture-related problems and promotion of positive posture habits in schoolchildren, with the cooperation of teachers and parents
- 2 development of a concept for practical application in schools
- 3 principles of good use to be developed in collaboration with the children and taught in everyday situations, for example sitting, writing, etc., according to the method of F.M. Alexander.

EVALUATION

Project goal no. 1: Prevention of posture-related problems and promotion of positive posture habits in school children with the cooperation of teachers and parents.

One of the shortcomings of this project was, that we did not plan for an orthopedic check-up of the children during the years after the project end. Therefore we divided the overall goal into smaller outcomes so that we could formulate criteria that allowed for comparisons between, before and after the lessons.

These sub-goals were formulated as follows:

- The majority of the participating children realize that they can influence their well-being.
- At the end of a course of ten sessions, each lasting 1.5-2.0 hours, the children and teachers will be able to:
 - a. Relate anatomical knowledge to their own body. (They will know the position and function of important joints, and understand the function of muscles and skeleton.)
 - b. Apply the principles of efficient use in the daily life at school (give oneself time, be aware of the own condition - *Befindlichkeit* in German - and adjust 'outside' conditions to the individual situation, e.g. tilting the table instead of bending the spine).
 - c. Deal better with stress, or have new strategies for dealing with stress.
 - d. Improve their kinaesthetic awareness and understand that, in the long run, habitual behavior is not always the best.

The effect of our teaching on the children was the most difficult to assess. The following methods were used:

- questionnaire (before and after)
- interviews (with each child after the project's end)

- feedback given during the class as informal questions were asked
- written statements of the children of the third grade
- videos and photographs.

Some mistakes occurred in our evaluation, e.g. we asked children to paint pain pictures at the beginning of the project. These are pictures of where the children feel pain during sitting, using different colors for 'always painful', 'sometimes painful' and 'seldom painful' spots (fig. 1). At the end we referred to their pain situation only during an interview. For comparison it would have been better to use the same method (pain pictures) throughout.

Project goal no. 2: Development of a concept for practical application in schools

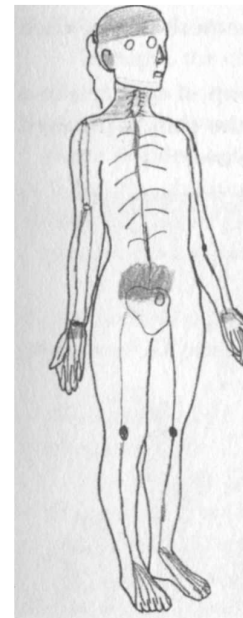


Fig. 1 A pain picture.

- Teachers understand the physiological importance of an individually adjusted workplace and know how to organize it.
- They understand how important a tilted table is.
- They can give more time to themselves and to the children.
- A brochure for teachers has been prepared.
- Steps for future training of teachers have been prepared.

The means of evaluation were teachers' reports, based on questions.

A brochure for teachers was produced and a workshop for Austrian schoolteachers was held at the Pedagogical Institute, the main professional development institute for schoolteachers in Vienna.

Project goal no. 3: Principles of good use will be developed in collaboration with the children and taught in everyday situations, for example sitting, writing, etc., according to the method of F. M. Alexander.

The third goal is really information about the methodology and cannot be evaluated.

METHODOLOGY THAT WORKED

Working with a group of 28 children is a great challenge, but certain strategies helped us to cope with this situation.

- Be well prepared.
- Have a structured lesson, for example:
 - i. five minutes of verbal explanation, followed by 15 minutes of experiments
 - ii. a simple task carried out by the child on his/her own at the table while hands-on work is done
 - iii. a group session for ten minutes to summarise and discuss the understanding and experience of each child
 - iv. if possible, work with a small group of children in a separate room while the rest of the class is involved in some other work, then change over.

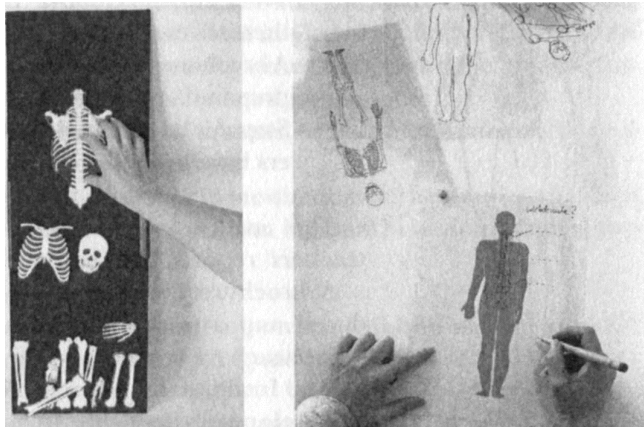


Fig. 2

Fig. 3

- Provide individual hands-on work while a child is engaged in an ordinary task given by the class teacher.
- Special teaching materials make teaching easier. In collaboration with a product designer, we developed a few teaching materials which are re-usable and which can support autonomous group work. See examples in figs. 2 and 3.

Four-pillar model

We found it useful to divide our teaching programme into four groups.

1. *Anatomy and understanding of the forces that act upon the body (gravity, pressure, pull):* function of joints, bones and muscles; balance of the head and its influence on the coordination. Much inspiration is to be found in Arsenault (1993).

Finding the skeleton - Game for groups of five children:

To begin, the children paint a contour of one child on a big paper. With a picture of a skeleton as a reference, they try to paint the skeleton on the big paper (fig. 4). (This works better if it is decided beforehand who is responsible for which part.) When the children are ready, they are asked to explain their skeleton picture, which helps them to verbalize the work that was done, and finally all pictures are pinned on the walls.

2. *Improvement of kinaesthetic awareness through hands-on work, games, and AT principles.* See also Sue Merry (1999).

Inhibition Game I (good when discipline is low and children need to move)

Play a simple musical instrument (we used a Sanza) While the music is playing, the children can dance or listen quietly, but no talking is allowed. (Breaking this rule leads to being 'petrified' by a teacher for a whole round.) As soon as the music stops, children may walk and talk, but they must keep listening, because the music may resume at any time.



Fig. 4 Anatomy

Inhibition Game 2 (for a break):

The idea is that you have some people to whom you may speak and some to whom you must not talk - but who may talk to you. (Try this with your family members. For one evening do not talk to one pre-selected person, while everybody may talk to you. Before you start, tell everybody what you are doing and identify the person to whom you are not permitted to speak.) It brings about a strong sense of inhibition in activity. For working with children, use stickers in four different colors: red, green, blue and yellow. Each child receives three stickers of one colour. Children with red stickers may talk to those with yellow and green, but not to blue. If they forget, they must give one of their red stickers to the 'blue' child. Blue may talk to green and red, but not to yellow. If they forget, they give one of their blue stickers to the yellow, and so on. For each colour there is one which its bearer is not allowed to speak. One must be ready to repeat the rules and an adult must be present during the game. It was great fun for all of the children.

3. Optimizing the workplace

A good entry point to the topic was to prepare four different workplaces for the children: one had low chairs, one a low table, one a gymnastic ball and another a tilted table. During the two weeks that the workplaces existed, preferably at the project onset, the teacher ensured that each child had a chance to sit at each workplace. Then we assessed them together with the children, and rules for good workplaces were established. We liked the idea of 'guerilla ergonomics' (Cranz 1998): using simple, inexpensive materials to improve workplaces, e.g. telephone books under the feet, self-made slopes for desks, etc.

4. Coping better with everyday situations: hands-on work during writing, reading, speaking, etc. (figs. 5 and 6).

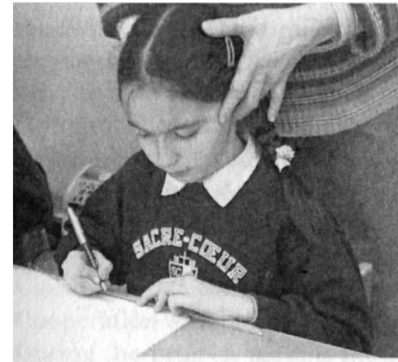


Fig. 5 Hands-on work.



Fig. 6 Hands-on work.

RESULTS

Pain

At the beginning of the project, children painted pain pictures (fig. 1). It is alarming how many children experience pain, much of it perhaps posture-related, from the first grade onwards. The post-project interviews showed very favorable results for the third-grade children: 18 of 24 reported less or no pain after the end of the project (fig. 7). Unfortunately, we did not ask the

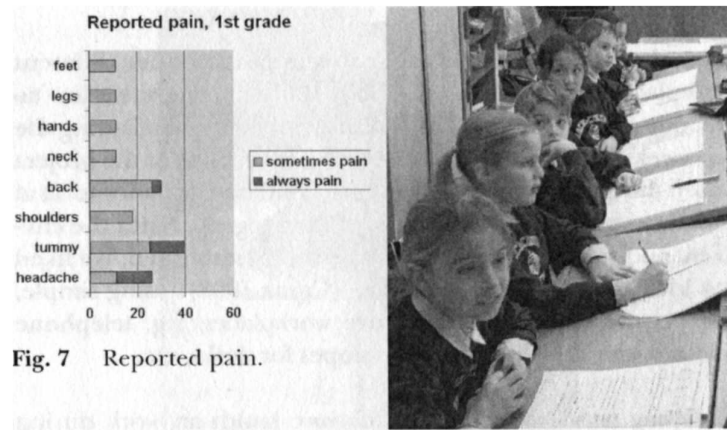


Fig. 7 Reported pain.



Fig. 8 From a video recording.

children to draw pain pictures at the end of the project, which we could have compare with those done at the beginning.

Anatomy

At the beginning and end of the course, each child marked important joints on a skeleton picture. In this way we were able to show that the children had an increased understanding of where to find certain joints and for what movements they are used.

Use in everyday life

Through interviews and in-class feedback, we tried to ascertain whether children used directions after the end of the project. They reproduced the sentences as they had heard them, and it was noticeably easier to guide the children out of their habits in the end. Video recordings show a change in the children, especially during the project classes towards the end of the project (fig. 8). But a videotaped glimpse of the children during their normal classes showed movement patterns very similar to those at the beginning. I think we managed to give a few moments of ease and an idea of possibilities, but much would have to be changed in a school in order to bring about a consistent use of

the principles of the Technique.

Acceptance of the method

More than two-thirds of the children wanted the lessons to continue. Supported by the teacher and paid for by the parents, the third-grade class continued lessons for one year, once a month. This is really not sufficient. The hands-on work was most welcome for many children, and we - Alexander teachers - felt that the individual dialogue was the most precious element for the child, the experience of being seen and asked about her/his needs and feelings.

Workplace adjustments

Both classes had adjustable chairs and tables, but the teachers did not have the necessary knowledge to put these to their best use. While most of the children noticed relief while working on sloping tables, most teachers discouraged their use because of time and noise. Here, there is scope for training of teachers. However, necessary changes go beyond establishing the correct height of chairs and sloping tables. Children sit too much. This fact needs to be addressed in cooperation with teachers and all concerned.

Cooperation with parents

Cooperation with parents was as important as with the teachers. During the project, parents received a lot of information. Ten of 27 parents visited a parent-child workshop after the project ended, in order to experience together with their children what the children had learnt. The aim was to make the parents aware of the need for good workplaces in the home. We think involving the parents is one way to make the work more sustainable.

Project presentation for school-teachers

Ideally, this presentation would have generated interest among schoolteachers for similar future projects. However, we did not manage to create a positive response. One main criticism was the cost. Another was the loss of time due to project activities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We found it highly rewarding to work with children in the school, although it was challenging to cope with groups of 28.

Most of the children we met during the project had learnt already, that being uncomfortable or even in pain during long hours is normal and that they have to put up with it. I hope that our work made them realize that we can look for and find ways to be and feel better. For more sustainable results, weekly sessions with the class over several months in two or three successive years would be needed.

Children need to be given more opportunity to sit better and/or to move more during class as well as during the breaks. The set-up of classrooms and teaching and learning styles in schools have to (and will) change in the years to come, and I hope that we, as Alexander Technique teachers, will play a part in effecting those changes. Good luck to everybody.

Acknowledgements

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For information about and order of teaching materials, DVD films and brochure please refer to: esther_hollander@gmx.net. Project homepage (in German): www.leichtigkeit-lernen.at. Information about project criteria and terminology: www.cciuint-essenz.ch

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Before she became an Alexander teacher, Alexandra Mazek studied agronomy and worked as a team leader on an agricultural development project in Nepal. She maintains a private teaching practice in Vienna, Austria.