

## Isabelle Ashton – Alexander Technique Essay

### **‘Teaching the Alexander Technique to children is the way forward for our society’. Discuss.**

In 2018, the Mental Health Foundation carried out a study which discovered that 74% of people felt so stressed that year, that they were overwhelmed or unable to cope. Researchers at Imperial College found that chronic pain affects between one-third and one-half of the population of the UK.<sup>1</sup> The costs attributable to back pain in the UK are estimated at £12.3 billion a year, with £1.6 billion spent on treatment.<sup>2</sup> These are scary statistics, but most likely for most, not that surprising. We all feel the increasing pressure of our society. The world seems increasingly fast-paced and it can be hard to keep up. The Alexander Technique could help every person to feel happier and healthier, it is a skill that would be beneficial to everyone. We all know how hard it is to break a bad habit: to ‘un-do’ or to ‘un-learn’. Why not teach the next generation the Alexander Technique, *before* bad habits start to develop, so that they have the toolkit at hand? Alexander work teaches us constructive conscious control. Childhood is the perfect time to learn these skills. School is the perfect place to teach them.

In our society today the connection between physical and emotional problems is gaining currency. Despite this, the fix for our problems tends to acknowledge one issue and ignore the other. Chronic back pain? Visit a physio and take these painkillers. Not sleeping right? Go to the pharmacy and ask for sleeping pills. None of these ‘solutions’ tend to fix the core problem, yet the Alexander Technique actually could. Jack Stern, a spinal neurosurgeon, believes that ‘97% of people with back pain could benefit by learning the Alexander Technique’.<sup>3</sup> In the Technique, there is an awareness that mind and body are one functioning unit, rather than two separate entities. The principle of Psychophysical Unity states that every physical aspect of your being is inextricably linked to your mental processes. Every mental process reflects or expresses itself somehow within your physical body. This awareness takes the understanding of one’s Self to a much deeper level. The Technique can then improve chronic pain, muscle tension and stiffness and poor posture. It can aid breathing, sleeping and vocal problems, help with high blood pressure and can even support managing diseases like Parkinson’s.<sup>4</sup> The Technique can also assist in balancing moods, changing behavioural patterns, controlling panic attacks, stress, poor body image and lack of confidence. Interestingly, some people experience powerful cathartic reactions at the start of their Alexander journey, such as fits of giggles, crying, deep excessive sleep, or disturbed eating patterns.<sup>5</sup> This is often a resurfacing of forgotten events of the past. It is a time when people

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<sup>1</sup> Bazian/NHS, *Almost half of all UK adults may be living with chronic pain*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2016, Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://www.nhs.uk/news/medical-practice/almost-half-of-all-uk-adults-may-be-living-with-chronic-pain/>

<sup>2</sup> Moya Sarner, *Back Pain*, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018, Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/14/back-pain-how-to-live-with-one-of-the-worlds-biggest-health-problems>

<sup>3</sup> Tim Soar, *FM Alexander*, Accessed May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, <https://www.alexander-technique-online.com/articles/defining-the-alexander-technique/fm-alexander/>

<sup>4</sup> Pedram Sadough Moghanlu, *52 Reasons to try Alexander Technique*, Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020, <https://myergonomicchair.com/alexander-technique/>

<sup>5</sup> Tim Soar, *Emotional Issues*, Accessed May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, <https://www.alexander-technique-online.com/articles/defining-the-alexander-technique/emotions/>

feel ready to deal with buried emotions. Once the physical tension starts to ease, the emotions rise. Most adults come to the Technique looking to help with physical pain but walk away with a new awareness of mind and body. The Technique helps them to heal. What if we could gift children this toolkit so that they have the awareness and knowledge to deal with these problems as and when they arise, rather than after?

Over recent years, education policy has led to many mainstream schools giving less and less time to the individual needs of developing children. Classes are getting larger, teachers are overworked, and children are suffering as a result. The furniture in schools is often the wrong size or badly designed, leading to children being unable to place their feet on the floor or sit



with their knees higher than their hips. The classrooms themselves are too small for the increasing class sizes, meaning children are squashed together during carpet time, sitting with legs crossed and arms folded: shown in the image to the right.<sup>6</sup> This a position that causes huge stress on their lower backs, as well as causing children to crane their necks to see around the obstacles of the room.

Not only is the environment of primary schools lacking thought towards the children's wellbeing, but the atmosphere that is created during the school day is also damaging. School days are constant and lack relief from noise and activity. There is often a feeling of needing to rush in lessons or that there isn't enough time to complete a task with ease. Some children simply can't keep up with this pace which can lead to stress and feelings of defeat and negativity; this then leads to disruptive behaviour.<sup>7</sup> The westernised schooling system is setting its' children up to fail. This is detrimental to children's, and therefore society's, future happiness. Despite this, it would not be hard to morph the system into something more considered through the principles of the Alexander Technique. Through simple changes of language from the teachers, children could have completely different mindsets. Being told to sit 'tall and soft' rather than to 'sit up straight' is just one example.

Alexander work with adults is often seen as a re-education: 'unlearning' or 'undoing' habits and discovering a new balance in the body. The advantage of teaching the Technique at a young age is that the children could skip the step where they learn the bad habits. We tend to think of bad posture as something that adults deal with. Knowing that the problems actually start emerging around the age of 7, due to sitting uncomfortably at school, changes the perspective. Children of nursery age have a naturally good Use; by bringing them conscious knowledge of this natural poise the Alexander Technique would be able to reinforce good Use and give the children skills which they can maintain throughout their education and into their life beyond.

Schools are very disciplined, as they need to be, however children can often feel like they have no control in this environment. The Alexander Technique gives a child awareness of themselves and the world, helps them to feel in control and thus make more confident and

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<sup>6</sup> BBC Newsround, *Is your school too overcrowded?* 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2013, Image Accessed 13 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/23944046>

<sup>7</sup> The Developing Self, *Resources: Diagram of common problems in Primary School*, Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://thedevelopingself.net/resources#84c34b5b-52f8-4fd6-9e66-6330da44964d>

conscious decisions. They would develop more open and curious minds, understanding that mistakes are a part of learning: not something to be feared. We are taught to be 'end-gainers' from an early age by both our educational system and modern Western culture in general. Alexander highlights the fact that most children are being taught by teachers who are suffering from unreliable sensory awareness themselves. The children often do not understand what is being asked of them but, if conscientious, will strive to 'get it right' (end-gaining) without any awareness of the cost incurred. If fear reactions are stimulated, this affects their ability to be open and assimilate the material being presented. He says that psychophysical coordination needs to be addressed in order that the child is in a fit state to learn.<sup>8</sup> If children don't have to try and reach a goal to tick a box or to please their teacher, instead enjoying the process and learning as they go, they would be able to manage to stress and conflict more effectively and would have improved emotional resilience and impulse control.

Not only is the Technique great for children's minds, but it facilitates learning. Research shows that by sitting balanced, rather than slumping, there is increased oxygen to the brain which improves learning.<sup>9</sup> If a child has learnt how to do tasks without excess tension, they'll have more coordination. When they can focus better, the learning process becomes more comfortable and enjoyable and children can work harder. '*New areas are opened, new possibilities are seen and then realized; one finds himself continually growing and realizes that there is an endless process of growth initiated*'.<sup>10</sup> Alexander lessons stimulate the ability to learn simultaneously on different levels; physically, intellectually and emotionally, creating endless benefits to learning the Technique from an early age.

Professor John Dewey said that '*the discovery (of the Alexander Technique) could not have been made and the method of procedure perfected except by 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 they may come to possess as early as possible in life a correct standard of sensory appreciation and self-judgement*'.<sup>8</sup> Dewey was an American philosopher and educationalist who advocated experiential learning, or 'learning by doing', which was extremely progressive at the time. His ideas resonated with Alexander's ideas about psychophysical unity, the dangers of end gaining and the pitfalls of faulty sensory perception. Alexander himself specifically said that he saw education work with young children the way forward for the Technique. He only taught adults so that they would be more likely to allow their children to learn. The first attempt to use the principles of the Technique in a primary school was at the 'Little School', officially named 'The F. Matthias Alexander Trust Fund School' in 1934. The school ran from 1924 until 1942. FM Alexander had two apprentices, Irene Tasker and Ethel Webb. They had been working at Ashley Place, Alexander's house and teaching rooms in London, helping with pupils and doing general odd jobs. In 1924, a young boy of 8 came from India for lessons with Alexander. He was under Irene's guardianship at the time, so she asked Alexander if she could link up his lessons in the work with application to all his school lessons. He realised that 'this may be just the opportunity that they wanted.'. Irene then began working with this boy who

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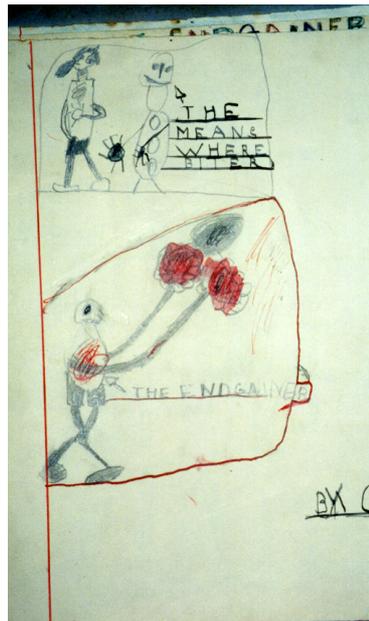
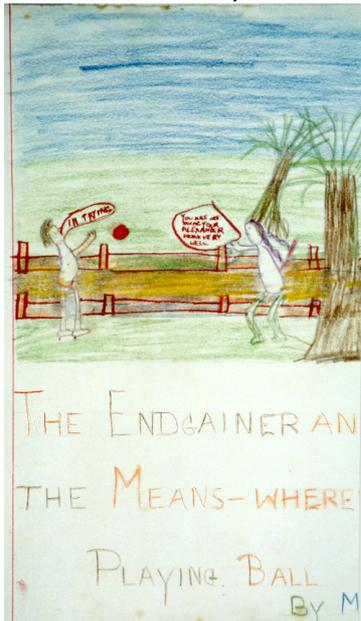
<sup>8</sup> F.M Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, Mouritz, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2004

<sup>9</sup> The Society of the Alexander Technique, *Alexander in Nursery and Primary Education*, Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://alexandertechnique.co.uk/education/alexander-nursery-and-primary-education>

<sup>10</sup> F.M Alexander, *The Use of the Self, Introduction*, Orion, 1st November 2001

was soon joined by other children. These children were mainly from parents who were having Alexander lessons at Ashley Place themselves. From this, the Little School starts.

The Little School taught the normal school curriculum alongside teaching children to improve the Use of themselves. Alexander's work has been described as 'learning how to learn' and The Little School demonstrated this aspect of the Technique at its most explicit. 'The Alexander Times' was a termly magazine which was the 'end' for which the students organized their 'means'. It was considered an honour for the student's English work to be included in the magazine, which included examples of characters and stories created to help teach the Technique.



Images of the 'Alexander Times' entries by the Little School students.

In the image on the left, the 'End-gainer' and the 'Means-where' are having a discussion. The speech bubbles read: 'I'm trying', to which the End-gainer replies 'You are not doing your Alexander work very well'.<sup>11</sup> This is an example of non-doing, illustrated through a child's understanding. On the right, is another illustration, depicting the same two characters. The End-gainer appears to be pulling his head back, showing this child's awareness that the neck must think forward and up.

Alongside storytelling techniques, there was a lot of hands on work at the Little School. Alexander himself liked to be at the school as much as he could and taught children in the same way as adults. They would all sit together, and he would work on them in turn, helping them in and out of the chair (picture to the right<sup>9</sup>). Brain development in children is impacted positively by physical contact and negatively by a lack of it, proving the importance of this hands-on work.<sup>12</sup>



The way that the children performed their work and lived their day was a very important part of the learning experience at The Little School, rather than focussing

<sup>11</sup> The Developing Self, *Resources: The Little School Presentation* Accessed 26th April 2020, <https://thedevelopingself.net/resources#84c34b5b-52f8-4fd6-9e66-6330da44964d>

<sup>12</sup> The Developing Self, *Resources: Touch is good*, Accessed 26th April 2020, <https://thedevelopingself.net/resources#84c34b5b-52f8-4fd6-9e66-6330da44964d>

only on the end result. Normally in schools, children are bombarded with a lot of new information and skills but aren't actually taught *how* to do these things efficiently. Children start school and immediately start spending a large amount of time at a desk, holding a pen and dealing with new daily pressures. How can a 5-year-old be expected to deal with this huge change of lifestyle with ease? It is an overload of information. With Maths and English skills intruding their minds, there is no time or space to notice how they feel. Fast forward a few years, and you see classes of teenagers slumped over their work, complaining of back pain. They have lost the coordination and buoyancy that came effortlessly to them as toddlers. The Little School proved that teaching children the Technique alongside mainstream education could be successful. The priority must be the means whereby, not the end.



An example of students lying down in semi supine.<sup>13</sup>

After the Little School, there were several other educational projects worldwide, but no other long-term Alexander projects in primary schools until 1997 with the opening of Educare Small School. Educare grew out of the belief that *'children who are able to deal confidently and skilfully with each new step in their lives are children who grow into happy, independent, fulfilled adults, able to take an active part in the society of the future.'*<sup>14</sup> Educare Small School provides an environment where this belief can become a reality, and is a working example of how it is possible to integrate the Alexander Technique into a modern school day.

Before the students even enter the school, teachers put hands on when they arrive, giving the child a chance to stop and think. A normal day at Educare then starts with Movement Circle, a series of movements, [demonstrated in this video](#)<sup>15</sup>, designed to enhance wellbeing and to help develop the skills necessary for effective learning. During this time, the children think about their Alexander directions and tune into their bodies. Doing this energises the pupils which in turn helps them to focus in their lessons.

*"It helps me think about my body! Movement Circle helps me wake up in the morning- so I am ready to work" - Daniel*

*"It helps me relax and stop thinking about stressful things that happen during the day" - Mila*

Quotes from students at Educare Small School about Movement Circle<sup>16</sup>

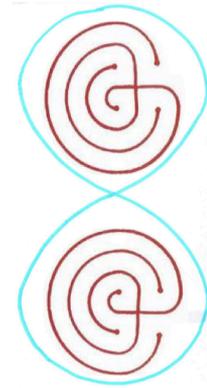
<sup>13</sup> The Developing Self, *Resources: The Little School Presentation*, Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://thedevelopingself.net/resources#84c34b5b-52f8-4fd6-9e66-6330da44964d>

<sup>14</sup> The Society of the Alexander Technique, *Educare Small School*, Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://alexandertechnique.co.uk/education/educare-small-school>

<sup>15</sup> Sue Merry, *Movement Circle*, Posted February 20<sup>th</sup> 2017, Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://youtu.be/HdzcXEeMxak>

<sup>16</sup> The Society of the Alexander Technique, *Educare Small School*, Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://alexandertechnique.co.uk/education/educare-small-school>

During lesson times, there is continued hands work while the students do their schoolwork, reminding them to come back to themselves. The children also put hands on teachers so that they can understand touch from the other point of view. Touch is a strong anchor in behaviour and learning and using hands-on experiences or manipulatives during the learning process greatly increases learning efficiency.<sup>17</sup> There are also group Alexander lessons, anatomy lessons, storytelling and PE work. The students participate in exercises called 'Lazy Labyrinths', shown in the diagram to the right.<sup>18</sup> These involve drawing or writing in a flowing way, so that the primary students can focus on how they approach these new skills as well as noticing what they're feeling as they draw.



This helps to eliminate or avoid habits that can hamper good practice and effective learning of these activities. After lunch there is Quiet Time, where the whole school practices Alexander semi-supine work combined with energy healing positions and meditation techniques. This brings a focus and calmness back to the children, which is especially important after a playtime, when energy levels are high. Alongside all this, there are checklists on the walls reminding the children to check in with themselves.

*'Now my body can be soft and tall more automatically than when I started at the school. I had to think about it then. It makes me feel better being soft and tall'*

Eche - Student at Educare<sup>(13)</sup>

Educare school has also developed vocabulary to help teach the Alexander Technique. Children are taught to be the 'boss of their bodies' and learn language to articulate what they are feeling and how they are using their bodies. They learn to let their bodies be 'soft and tall' rather than 'scrunchy'. Heads are like 'floaty balloons' and shoulders are like 'runny custard'. These

words create imagery and help the child align the Alexander principles with what they are feeling. It also aids them in understanding the opposite of what they want: being tall and hard or scrunchy would be overdoing the directions. The Alexander Technique thus becomes a toolkit, which they can carry anywhere with them. *'It bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other human activities.'*<sup>19</sup> Of course, these children still fidget and scrunch, however, by just being aware of the Techniques' principles, the Educare students can have conscious control over their day and come back to themselves, which others their age might struggle with.

This content and structure of the school day at Educare also forms the basis for the standard Alexander Technique Curriculum that is now available to any primary school: *The Alexander in Education Foundation Course- Primary Level*.<sup>20</sup> This course demonstrates how easy it is to slot Alexander Technique into the daily schedule of any school. It is suggested that the

<sup>17</sup> Carla Hanaford, *Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All In Your Head*, Great Ocean Publishers, 1 July 2005

<sup>18</sup> The Developing Self, *Resources, Lazy Labrinth to print and use with a Child*, Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://thedevelopingself.net/resources#84c34b5b-52f8-4fd6-9e66-6330da44964d>

<sup>19</sup> John Dewey, Introduction to *The Use of the Self (F.M Alexander)* Orion, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2001

<sup>20</sup> Sue Merry, *Alexander Technique in Primary Education*, Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://thedevelopingself.net/primary-schools>

Educare Movement Circle could become a part of the morning assembly, or even a replacement. Moving and stretching in the morning would be infinitely better for students than sitting slumped on hard benches and floors. Simply highlighting this idea shows just how improved the schooling system could be if it were combined with the Technique. The benefits are unquestionable, the ideas and resources are there; we just need to implement them.

Every year, sick pay, medical treatment and rehabilitation for back problems consume vast amounts of money and time - a problem that is perfectly avoidable. The pressure on the NHS is immense and it will only increase as back pain and postural problems increase in our society. Nowadays we are curled over phones or staring into screens: necks craned, and minds disengaged. We don't think about the body and how it is feeling *until* a problem crops up. When we get a cold, we think to ourselves '*I'll never take breathing for granted again!*', but of course, as we recover, we simply stop thinking about it. The Alexander Technique is needed by the citizens of today's society more than ever. The Nobel Laureate Nicolaas Tinbergen noted that '*the importance of the treatment has been stressed by many prominent people (...) yet, with few exceptions, the medical profession has largely ignored Alexander – perhaps under the impression that he was the centre of some kind of 'cult', and also because the effects seemed difficult to explain*'.<sup>21</sup> It seems strange that the Technique is not more widely known, given the list of benefits. If parents knew that they could help their children avoid the back pain or postural problems that they experience in their own life, they wouldn't be able to sign up to lessons quick enough. The Technique and its' benefits need to be known and discussed on a larger scale so that we can implement them on a national level.

The Alexander Technique is a powerful toolkit and should be considered a fundamental. Maths, English and PE are all considered the necessary skills for our children to be learning, but the Alexander Technique is not only *just* as important as these skills: it enhances them. The Use and awareness of mind and body is something we take for granted in our society and we are slipping into a world of disconnect. Bringing conscious control to the next generation could lead to a turnaround for a wealth of problems, from back pain to mental health issues. If the primary school children of the next generation were gifted this toolkit, we would see health costs for postural pains plummet over the following decades, as well as seeing more success in every aspect of the children's educational path and life thereafter. The power of the Alexander Technique is infinitely beneficial to our society and our children; it is time that we start teaching it in schools and changing the path that we are on.

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<sup>21</sup> Pedram Sadough Moghanlu, *52 Reasons to try Alexander Technique*, Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020, <https://myergonomicchair.com/alexander-technique/>

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