

Brockwood Park School and the Krishnamurti Legacy

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As society and the technology that drives it become ever more complex, our children are force-fed increasing mounds of knowledge that are intended to prepare them for adult life and the demands of the workplace. The stakes are high and the pressure is on. Simultaneously, newspapers report that stress, depression and substance abuse are rife amongst teens, that we are producing a generation of youngsters who are self-absorbed, self-posturing and self-destructive. Politicians and parents wring their hands and pack the children off for another ten-hour day of classes, homework, coursework, tutoring, assessment and exams.

In the process children may absorb enough to become effective technicians and efficient employees, but have they been assisted in becoming responsible adults and good human beings? What of their capacity for affection, cooperation, and integrity? What of their ability to think deeply about life's problems, to find creative solutions to challenging personal, social and environmental issues, to conceive of an existence beyond the shopping mall, the office, the pub or the disco? Can the learning of such qualities be left to chance? Can parents relax in the knowledge that this important learning will be covered in pressure-cooker schools that are grappling with an over-laden, prescriptive National Curriculum? Can schools feel confident that the necessary input will come from the family, battered as it is by rampant commercialism, bruised by the onslaught of the media and entertainment industry, and in many cases broken by overly busy, absentee parents? The prognosis is not good.

In 1955, in his book *Education and the Significance of Life*, the educator and philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti commented on the problem. He noted the extraordinary degree to which the education provided by colleges and universities throughout the world was producing the same sort of people: We are turning out, as if through a mould, a type of human being whose chief interest is to find security, to become somebody important, or to have a good time with as little thought as possible. By the time his book was released, Krishnamurti had already founded two schools in India in an attempt to redress the failure of education to tackle what he saw as the deeper human issues. In 1969 he established his first, and only, school in Europe, Brockwood Park, in Hampshire, England.

These schools, he wrote: ... are to be concerned with the cultivation of the total human being.

As with Rudolph Steiner, Maria Montessori and A.S. Neill, Krishnamurti felt education held the key to bringing about a better human being. There were similarities in approach. His schools were to be informal and friendly, with great attention given to the relationship between educator and student. Freedom was to be the cornerstone, as it was for Neill, the founder of Summerhill. However, for Krishnamurti freedom was not related to doing what you like, an attitude he regarded as responsible for creating much of the chaos in the world. Freedom, he said, ... is not the opposite of bondage or an escape from the circumstances in which one is caught. It lies in ... the understanding of what is and going beyond it. This is the nub of Krishnamurti's teachings. The what is to which he refers is the actuality of our daily life: its joys, frustrations, fears and challenges, and the expectations, values and beliefs with which we meet it.

These are the facts of the human dilemma for Krishnamurti and he felt they went unexplored by education and by a society too absorbed with the creation of wealth. In *Letters to the Schools*, published in 1981, he wrote: This has been the constant pressure of all societies; career first and everything else second. That is, money first and the complex ways of our daily life second. Krishnamurti regarded the unwillingness to confront these 'complex ways' as lying at the heart of the educational crisis and indeed responsible for many of society's ills. It wasn't just that teachers felt ill-qualified and disinclined to tackle such questions, or that parents were generally too absorbed with their own careers, amusements and problems to engage children seriously, but rather that the whole activity of exploring and questioning values, beliefs and behaviour, was too threatening for many and certainly too subversive for the classroom. Krishnamurti felt a serious exploration of these topics would never occur within the National Curriculum, nor would the conservative public schools wish to encourage an inquiry for students that might threaten the status quo. Those who determine what our children learn want certain outcomes, and activities that deeply question the values schools are busy promoting are not likely to feature high on the agenda. Competition, self-concern, conformity and the urge for power, are

cornerstones in the education provided by many 'top' schools today, and are considered essential qualities for the student wishing to be a 'success'. That these same values are the principal causes for the environmental, political and social crises we face throughout the world, is apparently of no importance.

The failure of educators to recognize the regenerative nature of deep personal inquiry and reflection is the tragedy in this tale. However, Krishnamurti had no misconceptions about the reluctance of politicians, educators and schools to give the necessary time and energy to this process, and he wasted no time in setting up his own schools to ensure that it would happen. Brockwood Park School is one of six that he established worldwide. It has undergone a great many changes since its simple beginnings 32 years ago and since the founder's death in 1986, but the underlying intentions remain the same. As Colin Foster, the Director of Academics at Brockwood, puts it: Recognising that the disorder in the world is the disorder in oneself gives tremendous importance to an exploration of oneself as part of education. How then does Brockwood go about ensuring that this exploration takes place, that a genuine community of inquiry is fostered in the school and that students are receiving an education both in academics and in the art of living?

Students at Brockwood range in age from 15 to 19 years. The school is international and fully boarding, with students attending from around 20 different countries annually. Living with their peers from all over the world is an excellent way of heightening teenagers' awareness of their own particular likes, dislikes and cultural quirks, as well as those of others. Prejudices emerge early on and are discussed and analysed. What students quickly come to realise is that the differences are generally superficial and that fundamentally they have much in common with their classmates, whether they come from Berlin, Bangalore, Boston or Brighton. These contacts foster a global understanding, which goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge about 'foreign places' and into the realm of life-long friendships and shared narratives. Staff, too, represent a mixed bag of nationalities, and those who live at the school do so because they are interested in the intentions and wish to engage in the inquiry.

True to Krishnamurti's wishes, Brockwood remains small, with only 50 to 60 students attending in any given year, and an average class size of six. The intimacy of such a setting means that the relationships that form between teacher and student do not have to be based on authority and control. The failure of educators to recognize the

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Nothing of fundamental value can be accomplished through mass instruction, but only through the careful study and understanding of the difficulties, tendencies and capacities of each child...wrote Krishnamurti. He realised that such schools would be difficult to set up, expensive to run and could ...flourish only on self-sacrifice. But he was adamant: If parents really love their children, they will employ legislation and other means to establish small schools staffed with the right kind of educators; and they will not be deterred by the fact that small schools are expensive and the right kind of educators difficult to find. At Brockwood, the school fees do not cover the running costs, but staff receive nominal salaries, and trustees, friends and donors help cover the difference.

The day-to-day life and curriculum of the school is also shaped by the underlying intention to cultivate the total human being. During the first week of the school year, full attention is given to orientation of students and preparation of academic programmes, but time is also set aside to introduce the process of inquiry and the central role it holds in a Brockwood education. The programme for the first four days of the last school year included workshops on: Understanding Ourselves; Meeting Fear; Questioning Authority; Understanding Freedom. The intention in each case was not to provide answers and explanations, but to raise questions and to create an atmosphere in which the students felt comfortable to ask any question, knowing that they would be taken seriously by all present. This spirit of inquiry carries over into other activities within the school. One afternoon a week is devoted to Inquiry Time, when any topic can be raised and pursued through dialogue or presentations. Recent sessions have included topics as diverse as Beauty, Desire, Violence, and Sex, plus consideration of the film *Manufacturing Consent* - about Noam Chomsky - and the controversial lyrics of rap star Eminem.

Once students begin to feel that the actual content of their own lives warrants deeper thought and consideration, they become excited about the learning that is possible. As Ryan, a first year student from the U.K., recently explained "After being at Brockwood I feel like a completely different person and can deal with things in my life that I could not before. I can communicate my feelings and ideas much better. I can discuss philosophy, which is one of the most enjoyable and stimulating things I have done here. I have also learnt to admit problems I have. I have found that a lot of the tensions I have accumulated over my life have calmed..."

Brockwood offers AS and some A Level examinations, but there is no undue emphasis given to exams, and the wish to approach learning differently carries over into the classroom. The school is constantly looking for ways to have real-life questions and activities drive the curriculum, where students become the creators rather than the recipients of knowledge. While Krishnamurti was not interested in creating a new educational methodology, he felt that systems and theories could be useful to the teacher - though they should never be allowed to get in the way of direct relationship with the student - and he recognized that it was important for the teacher to keep informed of the latest developments in educational theory. Educators at Brockwood are encouraged to regard themselves as reflective practitioners, writing narratives on their formative experiences as teachers while also keeping journals on the ways in which they incorporate the school's intentions into practice. Kathleen Kesson, a professor from the U.S. with an impressive background in holistic education, has visited Brockwood to work with staff on this. She has also helped staff clarify the learning outcomes they wish for the students, some of which include 'awareness of conditioning'; 'integrated development of body, emotions and mind'; 'appreciation of and care for nature'. These are not lofty ideals designed to pad out a prospectus and receiving only lip-service in the classroom, but are the foundations on which teaching practice at Brockwood is built.

The educational legacy of Krishnamurti is very much alive at Brockwood. The relationship of the school to the founder is a little like that of the guild to the master painter of old: Rembrandt had his school of artists eager to learn from a genius, but at the end of the day each one of them had to take responsibility for his own canvas, his own life's work. The teacher can only offer so much and the student must make it his or her own and then move on. The art lies in the living of it. What we do with education is up to us. To leave it in the hands of politicians and experts is to deny our own intelligence, creativity and love, which is regenerative. Those who love their children and the children about them, and who are therefore in earnest, will see to it that the right school is started somewhere around the corner, or in their own home. Brockwood came about because of the love and concern Krishnamurti felt for the young of this world. He acted, and created a school that was to concern itself with the regeneration of the human mind. It stands as a tribute to a remarkable teacher and as a challenge to all of us who would see or hear a truth and fail to act.