

As featured in Resurgence & Ecologist issue 275, November/December 2012

## TRUE EDUCATION

Roger Ash Wheeler introduces a school that is encouraging its students to develop a deeper intelligence.

When I first walked through the doors of Brockwood Park School, I thought: "I would love to have attended a place like this". My first impressions were of a large living/dining room space with a wood stove roaring, a boy strumming on a guitar in one corner, a girl playing piano in another, and a small group snuggled and chatting around the fire. There were others lounging on sofas reading the International Herald Tribune or playing chess together. It was just like an extended family, a home-away-from-home. And the whole scene exuded an atmosphere of congeniality, relaxation and self-confidence.

In early April this year, my wife and I attended a parents' weekend at the school. Our daughter is in her second and final year at Brockwood, an independent boarding school in Hampshire founded in 1969 by the Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti, and were keen to find out what a weekend of attending classes would be like. Parents arrived from all over Europe (and even Asia), reflecting the international make-up of the 14 to 19 year old pupils. We were there to experience first-hand an environment that fosters a sense of freedom and self-motivation and encourages the students to think and inquire in an atmosphere of cooperation instead of institutionalised competition.

But is this really possible ? Some three decades ago I was an avid reader of Krishnamurti, and had attended many of his talks both in Switzerland and at Brockwood. After two years at a state school, our daughter was searching for a place that had less of an emphasis on exams and academic achievement, and instead created more of an environment that allowed space for discovery.

"Of course", says Krishnamurti, "the ordinary curriculum of Mathematics, Physics, Geography, History and Languages will be taught. But what is the point of education ? Is it merely to cultivate the capacity of memory, passing exams, getting a job ? Or is education to understand the whole significance of living and the meaning of life ?" He felt that education today was turning out careerists and neglecting the inner life of the individual. He believed, too, that much of the disorder that exists in the world is only a reflection of our own confusion and complexity.

Against all the odds of survival for such a small, fully residential school with just 70 students and 30 staff from 25 countries, after more than 40 years Brockwood has stuck by its principles of being a vegetarian school and adhering to an ethical code of agreements.

We experienced a first-hand account of those agreements, when students, staff and parents attended Inquiry Time, a weekly slot in the timetable where the school has no other agenda apart from inquiring into current issues. A number of topics were raised by both staff and students. And it was the democratic process of inquiry that I found the most engaging. What effect do negative actions have on the community ? What the best ways of handling such situations ? Instead of an authority dictating or administering punishment, the school as a whole looked at the myriad aspects of the situation, taking everyone's point of view into account.

Remarkably, we found that neither Mathematics nor English is compulsory. But we were led into a one-acre walled vegetable garden that was the practical application for a required course entitled Care for the Earth. The garden, managed by students and staff, and complete with greenhouses and apple trees, provides for part of the school's dietary needs.

Classes are small, with just seven or eight students (the yoga class seemed to be the largest, with 15,) and I attended the peer counselling class, where the teacher led the students and parents in a role play to develop listening skills. In the scenario, one student confided to another that he had just found out that he had got a fellow student pregnant. How would you respond as the confidante? These teenagers are being prepared for challenging situations and coached in building skills to help and support other students.

A unique aspect of the school is the role of the mature student. Generally in his or her early-to-mid twenties, and attracted to the school by an interest in Krishnamurti's teachings, the mature student receives room and board in lieu of offering four hours a day of service in the kitchen, maintenance, office or garden. The role also seems to serve as a bridge between student and staff, with the mature students acting as older brothers or sisters to the students, and offering emotional support or guidance. It was impressive seeing how comfortable and at ease students, staff and mature students were with one another. Everyone is addressed on a first-name basis, and the atmosphere focuses on discussion and exploration, thinking about deeper human issues.

At 8am the following day we all attended the Morning Meeting in the large octagonal assembly hall, and 10 minutes of silence ensued. We sat on chairs or cross-legged on the floor; no meditation instructions were given, no bell rung. Simply silence for 10 minutes, and then people quietly filed out of the room. In the classes we attended over the weekend, some of the teachers held a minute or two of silence before class began, to allow students to clear their minds, settle in and focus.

Although the school provides for both exam-oriented and non-exam-oriented students, the most important function of the teacher's role is to instil interest and motivate the individual to inquire and think clearly; to awaken in the student a deeper intelligence: a sensitivity to the complexities of human life; to what's happening inside with respect to the student's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

So, how do I see our daughter's growth after two years at Brockwood? On a visit home from school last year, to my surprise she sat patiently at our kitchen counter as I bombarded her (with restraint) for two hours with various questions on all aspects of boarding-school life. Gone was her impatience with my insistent, perennial parental interrogation; gone was her rush to her room to facebook her friends or catch up on missed TV. Instead, we discussed her highs and lows, shortcomings and achievements, hopes and fears, with a sense of equanimity and honesty.

And over our daughter's three-week Easter break, instead of spending her time with her friends in the village where she grew up, it was she who suggested that she, her mother and I go on a yoga holiday together, travelling and enjoying each other's company by train to southern France, without a word complaint on any aspect of the trip, bore great testament to how my girl has matured and developed over the past two years.

A much greater achievement for me than the results of any maths exam.

Roger Ash Wheeler lives on Dartmoor and runs the Barefoot Barn, a facility for yoga and meditation. As featured in Resurgence & Ecologist issue 275, November/December 2012.

This article is reprinted courtesy of Resurgence & Ecologist Magazine. To buy Resurgence, read further articles online or find out about The Resurgence Trust, visit: [www.resurgence.org](http://www.resurgence.org).

All rights to this article are reserved to Resurgence. If you wish to republish or make use of this work you must contact the copyright owner to obtain permission.