

Introduction: The Alexander Technique, Educational Practice, and Child Development

- *Taken from Plenary at the AmSAT 2017 Annual Conference and General Meeting* -

I want to tell you a little about what I am doing in the field of education. I doubt there's anyone here that doesn't feel that Alexander's work has an important place in education. I don't need to tell you that. And yet I've always wondered why Alexander's work is largely ignored in the field of education. How do we apply our work in this field; why has it not yet become accepted; and what is the meaning of our work as it applies to education and child development? These questions are not easy to answer, and for many years I've been pondering them and thinking about how to introduce our work into the field of education so that it becomes part of educational practice. And it still is not, as we know. I would like to talk today about these issues, and about the work I am doing at Teachers College Columbia University to explore them.

Ever since I began to study the Alexander Technique (I began having lessons in 1977, started training in 1979, and finished in 1983), I was convinced that Alexander's work had a special place in the field of education. I believed it was only a matter of time before the importance of Alexander's groundbreaking and revolutionary discoveries would be recognized and applied. It seemed obvious to me that if we could just show people how powerful and important this work is they would let us go into the classroom and work with the children, and we would have the beginnings of a new movement in education and revolutionize the field.

I thought, "One day, what I want to do with this work—after I train—is to start a school for kids." That's a difficult proposition, because if you're running a school for kids, you have to do all the things you do for kids that aren't this work. So then I thought, "Well maybe what I should do is train teachers to work with children. That would be a more realistic goal." So I went to graduate school and very quickly realized the difficulty of introducing this work into the field of education.

I finished my Alexander Technique teacher training and went to graduate school, finishing there in 1987. Right as I finished graduate school, my advisor asked me to give a talk. I was very flattered and gave a presentation on Alexander's work and child development. It was a group of maybe 20 people, and right in the middle of the talk, people in the group began to ask me questions: "Well, can you show us? Show us what you do." Some of them said, "I have neck trouble and neck pain, etc." And I was upset about it, because I felt that it was going to degenerate into a hands-on demonstration of Alexander's work and completely separate itself from child development. It was as if I was introduced to a rift between theory and practice.

A few years later, I got to know the dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, where I had gotten my degrees. And I got to know him at a personal level; I gave him some lessons, shared some of my writing with him, and I said, "You've got to understand how important this work is in education, and you've got to introduce this work within this graduate school." I said, "I'm in a good position to do it since I went to school here." He was interested at a personal level. He thought about it, and he came back to me a few weeks later and said, "Ted, I'd like to offer you a class working with professors who have back pain." [Audience laughs.] And that was the second *really* big introduction I had to the difficulty of introducing this work in education. I refused to do the class—I wasn't going to be, you know, a service provider for professors with back trouble. I said, "No, this work has to be taught in your curriculum concerning child development. That's what I need to be teaching." He didn't understand, and it took me another 25 years to be invited to teach a class in the academic world.

Balancing Theory and Practice

Anyway, I mention this because our work is seen as a practice, and as long as it's seen as a practice, it's going to be divorced from education, which is based on *theory* and practice. Even if we established our practical work in the classroom, what would this look like, and would it really change how children learn, or how our work is seen in the field?

To the extent that it was accepted, it would be viewed as remedial work, while the real and serious work in cognition, development, and neuroscience—all of which receive a huge amount of attention and study—would proceed. The real importance of our work would be overlooked, and never the twain would meet. To overcome this practice/theory divide, we need to do more than bring our hands-on skills into the classroom. We need to demonstrate and establish the significance of our work in the field by clarifying what our work is about and why it matters to learning, health, and education as a whole.

What goes on in child development, what goes on in early childhood study, and what goes on in education is theory and *research*. And, in order to introduce our work into the field of education, we have to do *more* to articulate what we bring to the *theory* and to the *science* of child development. So that's what I want to talk about today.

So, *psychophysical* education. I don't use Alexander Technique kind of language when I teach in an academic setting, because they don't want to hear about it. I don't blame them. They want to know what we can bring in a substantive level to education. In order to make sense of our work—and I think the foundation of what we do is the *primary control*—we have to articulate *how* it works. That may seem like an obvious thing, because we all think, "Well, get in the classroom, get your hands on the kids, show how important the head-trunk relationship is to child development, and, you know, they'll see it." The problem is that even today, there are probably 20 methods that all have some concept of a head-trunk relationship. What makes our work special? What makes our work meaningful? They don't know. I'm not even sure *we* know. We haven't demonstrated its scientific validity yet. We're trying—some of us.

Primary Control and Postural Support

The primary control, to put it simply, is a discovery about how children—and adults—function, and it's a discovery that has every bit as much a bearing on child development as Piaget's study on cognition. One of the first things we have to do is look at that.

[Ted shows a clip of a child working on sitting up.¹] There's a lot of research going on in child movement looking at how kids negotiate movements like this. There are, for instance, a lot of different variables that have to get looked at when kids move, because this little girl is not only dealing with her posture but she's dealing with weight of limbs—some of her limbs are fatter at this stage of development than they might be in a year. She's socially interacting with her mother or the caregiver here. She's trying to sit up and when she *does* sit up—I think her chubby thighs kind of got in the way—she doesn't even know what happened to her. It's all instinctive of course, her drive to do this. She doesn't even know if she's trying to get on her arm, if she's trying to get on her feet, or if she's trying to stand, and somehow, somewhere along the line, you'll see that she's sitting up. Kind of amazing. [Audience responds to the baby's success with applause.]

I think it's interesting that so much of what we do is instinctive. She's not consciously doing this. And she's very happy while she's there. She's become an upright human being instead of a four-footed or semi-supine human being. That movement pattern could be looked at in probably eight different ways—all of them valid. The way that has not yet been understood is the part that has to do with postural support. Because the primary control, as we all know, is right there—it could be seen quite easily. There's no question about it. But you notice that the caregiver is not thinking about her posture anymore, she's thinking about her social interaction, what she can learn, how she mediates this situation, moderates. The baby is doing a lot of things here that aren't really about her posture.

But one of the things we're looking at is how this posture works in the child. I think there's research on posture, which is difficult and complex, but I think that posture's mainly an automatic process, and I think Alexander discovered how it works. We need to articulate that in order to make that study part of child development.

We have to clarify how the upright support system works and why this system becomes interfered with. Preventing tension and restoring natural coordination in children are both important, not simply because these processes produce improvements, but because they are based on an automatic system.

We must understand and describe this system if it is to be established as part of our understanding of motor development in children. Just as cognition is a real and central aspect of child development, the working of the muscular system needs to be seen as a real and serious aspect as well. This recognition must include new forms of scientific study, since this system is simply not known or understood in the motor sciences, which increasingly view action in terms of neural pathways and learning. This is not to say that the current work has no validity. But if these approaches cannot account for loss of coordination in children, then we need a more complete model and explanation for posture and balance, which must include a more broadened conception based on the primary control.

Habit and Action

A second thing is habit and action. The entire process by which action takes place is habitual. We must clarify how this system works and why it needs to be brought under greater conscious control. This of course is what psychophysical unity is about. When we look at a child's use, we are not simply identifying harmful actions and making the child more aware in action but bringing the process of control to a more conscious and intelligent level. To address this problem, we have to do more than establish hands-on or awareness practices in the classroom; we also need to understand the nature of action in children and model this as a new paradigm of child development.

[Ted shows a video clip of a child walking.²] If you look at that child...just studying that child's posture is important enough, is critical. But posture works in the service of action, not even just movement. I mean my upright posture standing here is obviously working in the service of my ability to move in space. I'm not just wanting to *stand*, I'm wanting to stand in order to *do* things. And not only am I *doing* things—as a motor system—but I am doing things *meaningfully* and *purposefully*. That is the essence to me of what we mean when we talk about "psychophysical." Psychophysical could be described as the fact that we have a complex neuromuscular system, but it's even more complex than that, because being able to perform a movement meaningfully and purposefully in space means that I'm thinking, wanting to do something, having an idea of what I want to do, and that the body is acting in the service of that. That's why motor action is the secondary thing that has to be studied, because, although we think of executive function and these aspects of child development as being already under study, they are not actually being studied yet in child development—not the way we look at it.

A third aspect of psychophysical function that is intimately connected with motor function and behavior is attention. We normally think of *attention* as just that—a mental condition that is functioning correctly or not, that can be diagnosed and treated. But attention is related to action and is a fundamental part of the working of the psychophysical system. We can very clearly see this when we look at children at 6 to 18 months whose attention to—and interest in—objects is tightly linked to their *intention*, and whose attention is instinctive and completely unencumbered.

When we are a bit older and begin performing more complex tasks such as writing and speaking, we no longer have a fixed connection between interest in something and response to that thing, and our attention—which of course is much more complex at this point—begins to be disturbed by becoming too focused or too unfocused. And I believe, as did Alexander, that these conditions are directly related to the use of the system in action.

I think our work is every bit as much about attention in children as it is about movement and ideas. [Ted shows video of child walking with handrail.³] I just wanted to show you this little girl here trying to go to the handrail. They're studying her movement—her unconscious movement. They're studying how she's negotiating a tricky situation, and whether she's able to walk across this little area here, with help or without help. [Audience responds with laughter.] This is all about movement, but it's also all about her attention to her environment. Her ability to negotiate this railing and this little walkway are all related to the fact that she's attending to some things and not attending to others. It's interesting, isn't it?

I have to show you one other thing that is so basic in child development, this bit showing you the very, very intimate connection between motor function and attention in a developing child. [Ted shows video of infant tracking.⁴] This is at such an early stage that this little girl is not even able to track an

object yet. But her ability to track and her motor function—or motor control—for neck and head are directly linked and trying to get coordinated. Look here. Here again you see a connection between her ability to track the object and attend to it, and her ability to move her head—it's directly linked and coordinated. These are well worth looking at and if you are interested, go online and look up developmental movement, and you'll see a lot of people doing work like this with kids.

The Means-Whereby

I want to talk about one more thing: learning the means-whereby principle. There are a number of specialties that recognize that the subject of body use is important in child development and that teach various aspects of kinesthetic awareness. But too often these practices end up teaching a *kind* of movement or bodywork discipline without even being bothered by the fact that everything the child does in the classroom puts the child back into all his wrong habits—a very good example, I would say, of not appreciating mind-body unity. You can't expect a child to learn to relax better in playing violin if the very practice of playing elicits the harmful behavior that created the tension problem in the first place.

The problem of coordinated action is a problem of skill, and this requires the intelligent working out of ends and means in the classroom. This also means that we have to look not just at the child but at the methods being used in the classroom. In other words, we have to think critically about educational theory and practice—about educational ends and the means we use to achieve them. Dewey wrote about and analyzed in some depth the ends and means problem. It has direct applications to methods that focus on ends without taking into consideration the habits and propensities of the child who puts these methods into practice.

The means-whereby is so foundational to our work that we look at how we do something as the foundation for doing it well. We don't even have to describe it, because it's just something we do all the time as teachers and as students of this work. We do it in very simple activities like sitting, standing, or walking, but we also do it in more complex activities if we study a musical instrument. The whole question of *how* we learn skills with the means-whereby principle is still yet to be understood and even explored in the field of child development. It's another area I'm interested in studying.

Psychophysical Health

The last one, which I think in some ways is the trickiest, is psychophysical health in the developing child. If you think about what we consider to constitute a healthy standard of development in children, we would say, "Well, kids need basic hygiene and basic healthcare." We're very advanced in that respect. We also have a pretty advanced idea of emotional development in children. We certainly are, at least, somewhat enlightened about it compared to a hundred years ago. We have a pretty advanced idea of cognitive development and even neurological development, because these are areas in which people are doing a lot of research. But we have no integrated concept of what it means to be healthy in *body and mind*—virtually none. An example of that would be a child who spends hours and hours and hours using hand-held devices or a computer and is slumping badly in the chair and is not attentive. If he gets a clean bill of health from the doctor, if he's doing well in school and there are no clinical problems, we would consider the child to be healthy. But I would *not* consider that child to be healthy. I would consider that child to be in a compromised state of health.

Without a concept of psychophysical function that includes motor development (i.e., the motor system and how the motor system works in action), *how* we attend, and our *level* of attention, we can't possibly or adequately assess whether a child is, as a holistic system, healthy or not. That's another area that I don't think is currently being explored, because there's no concept of it. At the root of that, I should add, it's critical—if we are going to look at that in children—that we not turn it into just hands-on work.

If you do hands-on work with children, if you conceive of *use* simply as a harmful bodily pattern, you cannot conceive of the child in holistic terms. It becomes sort of overly physical. Once you're looking

only at posture or even motor awareness, you can't look at attention and the overall effectiveness of the child's movements in space and purposefully doing things.

In other words, you have to have a developed concept of the whole system and the different elements that go into it if you're going to look at psychophysical health in a three-dimensional way.

All of those things together, to me, are what Alexander's work means. And I think there are other concepts I haven't thought of that other people will come up with—what Alexander's work means in the area of child development.

Teachers College at Columbia University: Developing and Defining the Field of Psychophysical Education

I want to say a bit about what I am doing at Columbia. Part of what we are doing at Teachers College is to explore how these elements intersect and comprise a much more complete conception of health in the developing child. We have all sorts of exercise systems and awareness systems, but without this unified conception, we will have only negative criteria for assessing it, no way of understanding how the muscular system functions in a healthy way, or of how to raise the working of this system to a more conscious level as a matter of constructive and progressive educational growth.

About six years ago, I was asked to teach a class at Teachers College, the education school at Columbia University. It was not for professors with back pain, thank God. It was a class in psychophysical education, and I said, "Great. I'm there. I'll do it."

I began teaching the class, and then I realized that if it's a master's-level class, I'll have very interested students who might incorporate these ideas into their own practice. But for the most part, it wasn't going to be something that was going to be researched in depth or incorporated into classroom practice in a really meaningful way.

So people at Columbia said to me, "If you really want to develop this as a *field*, you've got to do work with doctoral students." Little did I know what that involved. They said, "You have to get administrative support at the university. You have to develop a curriculum and you have to raise about \$225,000." All that took about four years. "And you also have to find a suitable student to supervise who is doing further research in the classroom." I did. She's now doing her coursework and training as a teacher full-time in the Alexander Technique at the Dimon Institute as part of her doctoral study. She is also starting to go into the classroom—I join her there—and we're going to look at some of these areas of development that I have spoken about.

That's what we've started to do. In order to continue, we have to do some research on child development; we have to incorporate these ideas into pedagogical practice—classroom practice—and see how they can be translated meaningfully into what kids learn. We're hoping to start another doctoral student to do more research in the area of developmental movement to see if we can develop this further.

I wanted to mention one other thing. If you think about our work as a field, it applies not only to child development, but also to skill and performance. To me there are four areas that I've always felt the Alexander Technique profoundly applies to: (1) health and prevention; (2) skill and performance; (3) child development; and (4) awareness (I put "awareness" as the fourth one, but however you want to put that—"mindfulness" or "psychophysical concept of mindfulness," perhaps?).

At next year's 11th International Alexander Technique Congress, I'm going to speak in depth about all this, and I might even bring my doctoral student/trainee to share some of her ideas and thoughts. I'm going to speak about how our work applies to these four fields because I think, as a field of study, as a subject matter, we need more research in specific areas. I think we are overbalanced in the direction of practice and underbalanced in the direction of theory and research. In order to develop a theory

and a field, I think what's required is more general theory. It has to be based on science. It has to say something beyond what we already know.

For instance, if we think that our work deals with *inhibition*, is that the same as the inhibition that the people talk about in neuroscience these days? I don't actually think it is the same. I think that you can be very good at executive function and inhibitory control in the way that neuroscientists talk about and still not even know about our work. So what's so important about our work if you can master the skills of executive function and inhibitory control and not even require the Alexander Technique? We're busy thinking that we could contribute to that field of neuroscience, but the question isn't whether we can contribute to it, the question is, "What do *we* mean by *inhibition*? Is it something different than executive function?" I think it actually is. I think it's almost like a new level of executive function, and we haven't even articulated what that is yet.

We have to develop the field in such a way that we can apply it to specific areas or problems. We tend to be very generalist. I think the biggest generalist among us was probably Alexander, because he thought that his work could pretty much solve everything. And with all due respect to the master, I think that our work applies to some things much better than other things. We have to be *willing* to say what that is.

Question and Answer Session

Holly Rocke: I have a question for you about psychophysical awareness in education. I agree with you that in normally developed children, that is an area that is not being explored, but in children with special needs, with IEP [Individualized Education Program] and 504 [a 504 plan sets accommodations for children with disabilities to insure academic success], some of that aspect is starting to being explored. Have you looked into—not in as much depth as you would like—but the multiple areas that are addressed by IEPs?

Ted: I have a little. I'm part-time faculty at Teachers College and I'm in the Clinical Psychology Department; that's where I was invited to teach. A lot of the work in that area is remedial. I think we have a lot to say in the remedial area, but my concern is that if we're primarily applied in that area, then we'll be seen as a specialized kind of service that we provide only to special needs, and I want to look at this as a function of normal development. I'm not saying that it's wrong to do that, I'm just saying that I'm concerned that we not get pigeon-holed. So in the same way that the professor—this colleague of mine many years ago—asked me to work with professors with back pain, I'm concerned someone will say, "You know what, I've got kids who are having postural problems in the classroom. Can you work with them?" And I say, "No, I want to work with *all* the children." Does that not answer your question?

Holly: Yes, it does answer it, but I wanted to say that some of those IEP goals they put in *are* addressing the child as a whole, so it's starting to come in. And I'm wondering if you see that as a way that we can start to look at typically developing children.

Ted: Yes, maybe, because it's sort of like mindfulness also. A lot of the mindfulness study or research these days is driven by clinical applications. So they're coming off a pretty good checklist of factors, absolutely.

Susan Overton: I'm sure you've given this some thought. I'm interested in how much of the faulty information I've gotten from the school system and teachers—things about trying harder, concentrating more—how that stuff is being passed down in education. And in fact, what we would want to be bringing to education would almost counter a lot of those assumptions.

Ted: Implicit in a lot of our educational practice or ideas are ideas about end-gaining, trying too hard, concentrating, etc. What we do goes against the grain of that. It's a really good point, because in educational practice...how many of you here have worked with performing artists in your career? [Many hands go up.] Look at the number—a huge number of us. My concern with the performing arts is that the Alexander Technique tends to get pigeon-holed. As respected as the Alexander Technique is, we still get the violinists that come to us after their shoulders go wrong. They come to us and we

try to help them. Meanwhile, the entire foundation of most music schools is end-gaining. I'd love to see someone start a music school based on these principles, right? A performing arts school, wouldn't that be cool? [The audience applauds.] I think that's what needs to happen, but it's tricky.

In early childhood education, there's such an openness that I'm not so worried about it there. In early childhood, teachers are open—it's very intelligent. Someone once commented to me—it sort of parallels something Alexander said—the higher you go in age, the less intelligent the teaching is. But the lower you go in age, to early childhood, you have the finest teachers—very thoughtful people. I think the most intelligent, groundbreaking work is often done at the level of early childhood.

Caitlin Freeman: My mother is an early childhood specialist.

Ted: You see I just complimented her!

Caitlin: She is amazing, and I have been giving her Alexander Technique lessons since I qualified. She has been incorporating them— obviously the mental aspects of the Technique without putting hands on the kids—but in terms of end-gaining, in terms of encouraging the children's attention, it has been helping. She has some children who are special-needs kids. It's been especially helpful for those with Sensory Processing Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome—very helpful for those kids, but also in general terms of building the group. I was happy when I saw you speak two years ago at the Congress, and I relayed what you were talking about to my mother, and she was just so pleased that you were looking at this aspect of education.

Ted: Thank you.

Endnotes

1. www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNk_Mstj1Y4.
2. www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzWHgT66Tks.
3. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBkqDqVge_c.
4. www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCFzqcje838.

Dr. Ted Dimon (Constructive Teaching Centre [CARR], 1983) completed his training with Walter Carrington, is Director of the Dimon Institute, and is an adjunct Professor of Clinical Psychology and Education at Columbia Teachers College, where he teaches courses on psychophysical education and awareness as cutting-edge disciplines. He received his PhD in Education from Harvard University. Ted has been training teachers since 1997 and has launched the first ever doctoral program in education based on Alexander's work. His books include: The Undivided Self; Anatomy of the Moving Body; The Elements of Skill; The Body in Motion; Your Body, Your Voice; Anatomy of the Voice; A New Model of Man's Conscious Development; and Neurodynamics: The Art of Mindfulness in Action.

Elizabeth Johnson transcribed Ted Dimon's plenary talk, and Ruth Rootberg combined Ted's written essay with the transcription.

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