

About Yasnaya Polyana

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The following text is an adaptation of a brilliant article by Semion Filippovitch Yegorov which originally appeared in PROSPECTS: the quarterly review of comparative education, vol. XXIV, no. 3/4, June 1994, p. 647–60.

Yasnaya Polyana—the home and the school

Yasnaya Polyana was the name of Tolstoy's ancestral estate near Tula. And this is where he opened his school in 1860.

At first, Tolstoy's intention of organizing a free school in his own home was met by disbelief and suspicion by the peasants. On the first day, only twenty-two children in all timidly crossed the doorstep of the school at Yasnaya Polyana. After five or six weeks, however, the number of pupils had increased more than three-fold. The education there was organized in a very different way from that at ordinary schools but, nevertheless, the number of pupils, boys and girls from 7 to 13, continued to grow.

Freedom and respect

The content of the education given, like its external organization, was not immutable but changed in accordance with the children's development, the capacities of the school and the teachers, and the wishes of the parents. Tolstoy himself taught mathematics, physics, history and other subjects to the senior group. Most frequently, he told stories in order to teach the fundamentals of science.

The children were punished neither for their behaviour nor for poor progress. The requirement that the personality of pupils should be treated with respect presupposed that, without punishment or coercion on the part of the adults, they would move towards recognition of the need to submit to the order on which success at school depended.

'Schoolchildren', said Tolstoy, 'are people, even though they are small. They are people with the same needs as ourselves, who think in the same way as we do. They all want to learn; that is why they go to school and that is why they will have no trouble in understanding that they must submit to certain conditions in order to learn.'

Cultivating a creative personality

Leo Tolstoy and the teachers at his school encouraged the pupils' independence, developed their creative abilities and succeeded in getting the children to assimilate knowledge consciously and actively. With this aim in view, they frequently set compositions, particularly on topics of the pupil's own choice that the children liked very much. In this, Tolstoy's school saw one way of cultivating a creative personality, able subsequently to establish new forms of social relationship worthy of a civilized person.

What most distinguished the school at Yasnaya Polyana was its attitude to the knowledge, abilities and skills that the children picked up outside school. Not only was the educational importance of these not denied, as was the case in most other schools, but, on the contrary, they were considered a necessary prerequisite for success at school. In the surrounding world there are an untold number of sources of information, but children are far from always interpreting this information correctly. The task of the school is thus to raise the information picked up by the schoolchildren from their surroundings on to a conscious plane. (A similar principle was later adopted in the system of the American philosopher and educationist, John Dewey.)

Good results

The duties of a teacher at Yasnaya Polyana were much more complex than at a school with a strict timetable, coercive discipline, a range of set methods of encouragement and punishment, and a strictly limited volume of knowledge to be studied. Here, the teachers' moral and intellectual faculties were constantly being stretched. They were required at all times to take into consideration the situation and abilities of each of their charges. In fact, what is known as educational creativity was demanded of the teacher.

But the results achieved at the school at Yasnaya Polyana were also different from those at other schools. As a former teacher at Yasnaya Polyana, Yevgeni Markov, said: 'We were able to observe the extraordinary progress of Tolstoy's pupils, among whom were some bright little boys who had been taken straight from harrowing or looking after the sheep and after just a few months were able to write quite literate compositions.'

Philosophical questions

- 1. What is a good school? Do we really need schools? Why do we need them? Why is education important? What is the goal of education? And what is the goal of society? What would happen to a child if he or she got no education at all? Would the child start longing for education all by itself, as Tolstoy suggests? Have school and education got anything at all to do with human happiness?*