

# **What is Eurythmy? Its Healing Influence in Schools**

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Editor's note: We begin where many readers will have first encountered eurythmy, in a school...

One of the first questions parents ask when they come to learn about a Waldorf school for their child is about the movement art taught in most Waldorf schools: eurythmy. What is it? Why does my child have to do this? After many years of working as a eurythmy teacher and in Waldorf schools' administration I find myself still answering these questions. Yet the answers grow and develop as the years pass and new knowledge both in science and education bring light to bear on the questions.

First of all, what is eurythmy? It is a movement art living in the family of movement arts, such as mime and ballet, yet standing midway between these two arts. It shares meaning and gesture with mime, yet it is married to sound rather than objects or recognizable actions and shares the moving-to-music and -words with dance, but seeks to follow the invisible movement within sound rather than move to it or juxtapose itself against it. It is the expression of the human soul through gesture and movement.

A student once asked: "Who thought this up?" after seeing the same gestures in the great art of the past. He had stumbled on the truth of the expressive gestures that artists, such as Giotto and Michelangelo, had mastered in their paintings. In the early part of the 20th century, Rudolf Steiner pointed us toward these gestures to learn their meaning and to find a new art of human movement. He worked first with a young girl and then an ever growing group of interested artists to develop this new art of movement.

Eurythmy begins with human speech. The center of movement is in the heart/larynx area of the body and the gestures flow into the hands and arms primarily, but encompass the whole human form. Its name, “eurythmy” means beautiful rhythm, or harmonious movement.

Eurythmy began as a stage art, but soon people said, this is beautiful and health giving, shouldn't we teach it to children? And so school or “pedagogical eurythmy” was born. It found a home in the Waldorf schools in Europe and later in the Americas. Then the question was asked, since this movement art expresses the whole human being, wouldn't certain movements strengthen the internal organs and relate to illnesses? Curative or therapeutic eurythmy was then developed collaboratively by doctors and eurythmists basing their work on Steiner's work in curative education. Unlike pedagogical eurythmy, therapeutic eurythmy is for a specific individual condition and is practiced usually one-to-one, rather than as a group activity.

All three types of eurythmy are appropriate in the school situation. Adults and children alike need to see artistic performances. It is then that the adult really is able to comprehend the scope of this new art. Children see what they are learning in a whole experience. They light up with enthusiasm on seeing such performances and are motivated to learn. Teachers have found the presence of a therapeutic eurythmist on staff is the greatest help in understanding and working with challenges that more and more children face.

What role does eurythmy play in the school? All healthy children take great joy in movement. They experience:

- Movement, music, poetry and stories in an age appropriate and joyful way

- Support and strengthening of language development
- Musicality and the power to listen
- Integration; the coordination of hands, arms, legs and spatial movement combine with eye, ear and balance, as well as thought processes

Intentional movement that creates complex neural development (see Carla Hannaford's 'Smart Moves')

- Focus: they feel how good focused attention is
- Joy and a sense of freedom in movement
- Confidence and balance of the inner and outer social capacities
- The ability to work on problem solving collaboratively in their group
- Creative thinking, and action based on it.

A student once said: “Eurythmy helps us to become more human.” This is the best answer I know why eurythmy is needed in the schools. It meets the ever-increasing demands of children of today, in health of the body and the soul. Even as an audience watching a eurythmy performance adults and children alike feel harmonized by eurythmy. It strengthens the healing effects of its sister arts, music and speech, and brings the curriculum alive.

A last word, again from a student: “Eurythmy helps us breathe.” It is the breath that gives us life. Eurythmy is the breath of the school. The human being as part of the whole creation is communicated to the community in eurythmy.

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