FORUM, Volume 48, Number 3, 2006

In Harmony with the Child: the Steiner teacher as co-leader in a pedagogical community

PHILIP A. WOODS & GLENYS J. WOODS

ABSTRACT This article provides a glimpse into what it means to be a Steiner teacher, drawing on research we have undertaken into Steiner schools in England. The distinctiveness of the philosophical context of Steiner teaching is highlighted, as well as aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and the collegial leadership of Steiner schools. Whilst not without its challenges, Steiner education offers an instructive and thought-provoking alternative to contemporary trends.

Origins and Aims of Steiner Education

When Rudolf Steiner was invited to found a school in Stuttgart in 1919, he had a very distinctive idea of what the educational philosophy, practice and governance of the school should be like. His vision of school education was grounded in the philosophy which he had developed (known as anthroposophy). The fundamental proposition grounding Steiner education is that 'each human being comprises body, soul and spirit' (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p. 14), and its curriculum and pedagogy aim to awaken the range of human faculties according to the anthroposophical model of human development. Integral to Steiner school education is encouragement of balanced growth towards 'physical, behavioural, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual maturation' (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p. 7).

At its heart is a spiritual process. As these faculties open up, 'the spiritual core of the person [strives] to come ever more fully to expression' (Rawson & Richter, 2000, p. 7). And the purpose is for each child to come to their own individual expression. The stated aim of Steiner education is not to create adherents of anthroposophy. Rather, it is to awaken young people to the spiritual and ethical dimensions of human life and to enable them to be free and independent thinkers and to make decisions for themselves.

The original Steiner school [1] was established for the children of the workers of a factory owned by Emile Molt, who invited Steiner to found the

school and develop its curriculum and pedagogy. (It could be seen as an early academy sponsored by private business, but without a philosophy that views education as subservient to the market economy!) In fact the school mixed the children of workers and managers, which was a somewhat radical notion at the time. Another touch of radicalism from its inception was the rejection of traditional gender divisions, such as metalwork for boys and needlework for girls.

Although there are now more than 800 Steiner schools worldwide, they all recognisably work within a curriculum and pedagogy that derive from the original. Remarkably, this is not imposed through a worldwide bureaucratic hierarchy. Rather, it derives from a shared commitment by those who become Steiner teachers to work out of anthroposophical teachings. Steiner schools are, nevertheless, now responding more to different cultural contexts, outside the largely Christian European culture in which the first schools were founded, as the United Kingdom and other western countries become more culturally diverse and as Steiner schools are established in countries such as Israel, India and Japan. This is likely to be a growing challenge for Steiner education in the twenty-first century.

Research into Steiner Schools in England

We have undertaken research, as investigators independent of the Steiner movement, into Steiner schools in England through two studies. One (conducted with Martin Ashley) allowed us to look at how Steiner education works in practice in the majority of schools, and included investigation of their curriculum, pedagogy, governance, and so on. (Woods et al, 2005); the other involved case studies of two schools, focusing on their collegial leadership (Woods & Woods, 2006a). The similarity in ethos and educational approach is striking, though in other ways the schools in England differ markedly – in size, financial security, age range and (to some degree) openness to change and accommodation with modern society. Our discussion of the Steiner teacher draws on this research and highlights some of the important and distinctive features of what it means to be a Steiner teacher.

Philosophy of Steiner Education

Crucial to understanding what it means to be a Steiner teacher is the larger context – in contemporary educational jargon, the vision. The Steiner teacher is guided by the principles and propositions of anthroposophy. One of the important aspects of the Steiner vision is the view that education should be a different kind of activity from that found in other, powerfully influential parts of society. Education is understood as a cultural activity which should not be driven by the same concepts, relationships and goals of the economy or of politics. These have their place, but that place is not in the classroom or the school. Steiner called his strategic framework the three-fold social order.[2]

That perspective resonates with what might be seen as more traditional ideas of mainstream education: the notion that education is about something that is not reducible to economic achievement, success in the world of work, and so on.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that the Steiner teacher is engaged in teaching which develops individuals unfit for the modern world. On the contrary, from our research, there is evidence that Steiner schools (which reject formal testing of the kind prevalent in English state schools and elsewhere) have substantial success in educating young people so that they can pursue higher education and a wide range of careers in the outside world. The clear educational aim is to bring about that all-round development mentioned above, and to develop in students, as they mature, the capability to think independently for themselves. Our research into Steiner schools in England tended to confirm that Steiner teachers do work to create independent thinkers (Woods et al, 2005).

This teaching is based on the centrality of understanding child development. Curriculum and pedagogy have to be in harmony with the phases of development young people are understood to pass through. For example, attention to physical activity and development (in Steiner terminology, 'willing') dominates in the early years (up to age 7); aesthetic and affective faculties ('feeling') come to the fore in the middle years (7 to 14); and concentration on the rational and cognitive capabilities ('thinking') is important in the upper years.[3] This, in part, is the reason for information and communication technology (ICT) not being introduced into the school curriculum until the ages of 13 or 14 – not from an anti-technology bias, but because its use at a younger age is understood to be out of harmony with children's developmental needs.

Pacing the school day, the week, the year is seen as essential, so that the life of the classroom and the school are in tune with the natural rhythms and development of the child. Balance and rhythms are key concepts. So the school day has time for verses, activity and exercise, and the year has a rhythm that follows seasons and festivals.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Throughout the years at school importance is attached to creating for the growing child an environment that is aesthetically pleasing and that nurtures a love of beauty, life, nature and learning. The environment is kept simple and natural. For example, props and resources used in the classroom include art materials (a high priority being attached to using fine quality materials), natural objects (such as crystals, pebbles, sand and nature displays), craft material (such as wool, modelling clay and beeswax), and the traditional blackboard with drawings by the teacher, on which time is spent to make them colourful and aesthetically attractive.

The Steiner curriculum, right through from age 6 to 18, covers the full breadth of subjects – including science, maths, modern foreign languages, the arts, English, history, geography and, in the older years, ICT. In addition, areas

of activity and learning, such as gardening, crafts and eurythmy (an art of movement originated and developed by Rudolf Steiner which is meant to help children develop harmoniously with mind, body and soul), are essential parts of the child's schooling and seen as vital to his or her harmonious development into adulthood.

The most important teacher for the student is their class teacher. In a Steiner school, the class teacher stays with the one class from age 6 to 14 – representing the importance of the teacher's relationship with that group of children. It is, then, a challenge for the class teacher to cover the whole curriculum. Specialists (subject teachers) are brought in for some subject areas in the older years. The prime responsibility, however, remains the class teacher's. Having the enthusiasm and commitment to learn about the different aspects of the broad curriculum is part and parcel of the class teacher's role. And conveying their enthusiasm for learning and understanding each area of the curriculum – from science to the arts – is an essential part of teaching.

Whilst there are classes in some subjects, the Steiner curriculum is not rigidly structured around subjects. A class will engage in project work or learning around a theme for several weeks, which may involve history, science, geography, maths and so on. Each teacher carries the responsibility for the curriculum and the pedagogy of their classroom. The teacher is not meant to be following slavishly any documented outline of educational practice or curricula laid down by others – even Steiner's own writings and lectures. Teaching is seen as a creative act that comes from the needs and the teacher's intuitive assessment of the class on the day. This is not to say that no planning takes place. Preparation – about the topic for teaching, about styles of pedadgogy, giving meditative attention to the students in the class before teaching, and so on – is necessary. But, it is emphasised that teaching is an art, not a technical task.

Fitting in with this general approach, summative assessments and tests that rank children (like the national tests in England) are not valued and are seen as positively unhelpful. For Steiner teachers formative assessments developed along the lines suggested by Steiner are, nevertheless, integral to their teaching. The emphasis is upon the individual development of each child and the continual use of child study [4] and pedagogical meetings to discuss aspects of children's development. There is no cramming or forcing development. Children are given time to unfold and awaken their connection with the world.

In Steiner education's understanding of child development, young people up to about age 14 are dependent on adults. The close relationship that the teacher has with his or her students to that age is exemplified by the fact that the class teacher, as noted, stays with the same class till age 14. There is perhaps a subtle difference here between mainstream and Steiner educational thinking. Mainstream education has become more convinced of the importance of student voice and there are renewed attempts to make school councils and other student forums active spaces for student expression and development as citizens. Steiner schools, in the younger years, put less emphasis on this. In our research we

found that Steiner schools offered significantly fewer formal ways of involving students in assessing or evaluating their own work up to age 10/11 than for older students (Woods et al, 2005, p. 70).

Teachers as Co-leaders

The Steiner teacher is a pedagogical leader – or, to put it a better way, a pedagogical *co-leader*. Teachers are collectively responsible for the running of the school and its educational character. Steiner schools are run by a collegiate of teachers, rather than a headteacher or principal.[5] This was Steiner's vision from the beginning, addressing the original Steiner teachers:

> The school ... will have its own management run on a republican basis and will not be managed from above. We must not lean back and rest securely on the orders of a headmaster; we must be a republic of teachers and kindle in ourselves the strength that will enable us to do what we have to do with full responsibility. Each one of you, as an individual, has to be fully responsible. (Steiner, 1919, *Towards Social Renewal*, quoted in Gladstone, 1997, p. 11)

Teaching is not distanced from leadership and governance. These are not responsibilities that the teacher may only wish to develop into later if they have a mind to climb a managerial hierarchy. There is no conventional, formal career hierarchy in a Steiner school.

Moreover, the meeting of the collegiate of teachers is not just a business meeting. The collegiate meeting is a space in the week for collegial study and other collective activity, as well as decision-making. Information is shared, anthroposophical texts studied, problems aired, and ideas and knowledge circulated through collegial meetings. Steiner emphasised that the collegiate

> becomes, in effect, a central organ whence the whole life-blood of the practical teaching flows and helps the teacher maintain his freshness and vitality. Probably the best effect of all is that these meetings enable the teachers to maintain their inner vitality instead of actually growing old in soul and spirit. (lecture by Steiner, 17 August 1923, quoted in Gladstone, 1997, p. 9)

One school we studied, for example, explains that its collegiate meetings

> begin with eurythmy which is followed by a meditative verse. The College works out of an imaginative picture of how it can work in harmony with the spiritual impulses that support and inspire the education. This is followed by a short period of study which then leads into the agenda for the week. (See Woods et al, 2005, p. 99)

Another school describes the weekly collegiate meeting as involving shared meditative work (through spiritual verses, artistic work, and so on), shared study (e.g. child study, reading and discussion of anthroposophical works), co-

mentoring (e.g. reflection on professional practice, self-evaluation) and pedagogical governance (e.g. responses to consultations from others in the school). In a collegiate meeting in which we participated, for example, important time was devoted to bringing forward names of children whom the teachers considered would benefit from reflection. Each teacher gave names of children, together with a brief reason. Significant time and attention was also given to child study of two pupils, whose study was spread over two meetings. (See Woods & Woods, 2006b.)

In our research, the perceived benefits of the collegial system of running Steiner schools included creation of a sense of 'ownership', drawing on the diversity of strengths and expertise in the school, reducing the division between education and management/administration and benefiting the professional and pedagogical development of the teacher. The Steiner teacher, through the collegiate and other forums, is a member of a pedagogical community. The collegial running of schools is an integral aspect of Steiner pedagogy, as it is seen as impacting upon the teaching and educational experience of children by facilitating at least three kinds of activity:

- collective attention to matters that directly pertain to individual children (in child studies, for example);
- shared development and sustaining of teachers' affective and aesthetic sensitivities (through collective artistic activity, for example), which is important to maintaining the inner balance and inner work of teachers so that their teaching attends to and reflects a holistic concern with the human being;
- consideration of strategic and other decisions (on finance, staffing, curriculum, and so on), which is informed directly by shared knowledge of the children.

Inner Development of the Teacher

The inner development of the teacher is an essential part of being a Steiner teacher. As the staff handbook in one school described it, 'It is assumed that teachers in a Steiner Waldorf School are continually striving to deepen their understanding and insight into child development through study, meditation, artistic activity and conferences' (see Woods et al, 2005, p. 93). What is involved in such inner development is more than advancing and improving one's pedagogy and abilities as a teacher. It involves collegial study of the philosophical works of Steiner, and so involves the teacher in those broader and deeper philosophical and ethical questions that underpin the everyday education of students. It also involves development of capacities for self-discipline and spiritual awareness (see Woods & Woods, 2006c), which are valued not solely for their personal benefit to the teacher, but for their positive impact on pedagogical practice and the relationship with students.

Challenges

None of this should be taken to mean that Steiner schools achieve their ideals or are entirely without their flaws. Many teachers, in our view, are too dependent on following the guidance and ideas of Steiner as if they were 'sacred' directions. Not all teachers necessarily achieve the very demanding level of responsibility and creativity that Steiner set out. The collegiate system does not work perfectly. Perceived problems in some schools include slowness and inefficiency, unfair distribution of responsibilities and internal power differences and personality clashes, though Steiner schools are working to improve the system (Woods & Woods, 2006a).

Changes in the relationship between the Steiner and state sectors also pose challenges for Steiner schools. For a number of years the UK Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship has been seeking ways by which Steiner schools could enter the state sector. Part of the motivation for this is to alleviate the financial difficulties that many Steiner schools find themselves in, not wanting to charge high fees that would limit the availability of Steiner schools to the well-off. Financial strictures limit places and accessibility to Steiner education and involve sacrifices for many Steiner teachers. The separation of Steiner schools also confines the mutual sharing and learning that could take place between Steiner and state schools. At least one Steiner school is on its way to becoming a state-funded academy. The requirement to apply national tests and to create the post of principal will challenge some of the most fundamental aspects of Steiner education. Most Steiner teachers want there to be more sharing and learning between them and teachers in mainstream education. The closer relationship, especially where it comes with state funding, has dangers for the strategic distance that is essential to the three-fold order.

Significance

The teachers at the first Steiner school were challenged to create a school environment that anticipated many of the ideas and practices that are influential today – such as teacher leadership and professional learning communities. Steiner education was, in these respects, ahead of its time. Today it still offers a challenge and a stimulating alternative to contemporary trends. This is not because it has all the answers. The point is that Steiner education offers a distinctive process of opening and nurturing children and educating the whole child in the twenty-first century. There is growing concern today about the effects that contemporary educational policy in the United Kingdom and global capitalism are having on the well-being of young people. A diverse group of academics, teachers and experts in a variety of fields recently expressed deep concern about rapid technological and cultural change and the adverse impact of pressures from market forces on children to act like 'mini-adults'. There is, they urge, 'a lack of understanding ... of the realities and subtleties of child development'.[6]

In a fundamental way, the Steiner teacher is seeking to tackle at a practical level in schools this very challenge of contemporary life. There is common cause between Steiner education and all those concerned that education is about much more than servicing the market economy and driving ever faster to achieve narrow measured attainments. The role of the state is to facilitate education that is in tune with the developing needs and potential of the child. The Steiner teacher, at his or her best, represents a consistent alternative to the impositions of the economic sphere and shallow prescriptions emanating from the political sphere. A philosophy of human development and purpose underpins a curriculum and pedagogy that the artistry of the teacher brings into life. That artistry draws both from an individual commitment to deepening understanding and spiritual connectedness and from the active community of teachers of which the teacher is a member and co-leader.

Notes

[1] Steiner schools are also known as Waldorf schools, especially outside the United Kingdom.

[2] The three-fold social order describes three areas of social life which Rudolf Steiner saw as needing to be in harmonious development: the economic sphere, the sphere of rights and politics and the cultural/spiritual sphere. Education falls into the last of these.

[3] Willing, feeling and thinking are features of children at all ages. The distinction is between those periods of development when each is most suitable for attention and development.

[4] Child study is a review of a child who needs special consideration, because of learning/behavioural difficulties, special qualities, and so forth, or who characterises a particular age or stage of development.

[5] Generally, full-time teachers are admitted to a school's collegiate when they feel able and willing to accept the commitment and responsibility that that involves and have been confirmed in their work. Some collegiates admit part-time teachers and, more recently, non-teaching staff, such as administrators – again, characteristically, when they feel able and willing to accept the commitment and responsibility involved.

[6] Modern Life Leads to More Depression among Children (letter), *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 2006.

References

Gladstone, F. (Ed.) (1997) *Republican Academies.* Forest Row, Sussex: Steiner Waldoorf Schools Fellowship Publications.

Rawson, M. & Richter, T. (2000) *The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum.* Forest Row, Sussex: Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship.

Woods, P. A., Ashley, M. & Woods, G. J. (2005) *Steiner Schools in England*. London: Department for Education and Skills (DfES). www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Woods, G.J. & Woods, P.A. (2006a) Lessons in Collegial Leadership? Case Studies of Two Steiner Schools. Paper presented at British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society annual conference, Aston University, Birmingham, 6-8 October.

Woods, P.A. & Woods, G.J. (2006b) *Feedback Report (Meadow Steiner School): collegial leadership in action*. Aberdeen: School of Education, University of Aberdeen.

Woods, P.A. & Woods, G.J. (2006c) *Feedback Report (Michael Hall School): collegial leadership in action*. Aberdeen: School of Education, University of Aberdeen.

PHILIP WOODS is Chair in Leadership and Educational Management at the University of Aberdeen. His research interests cover educational policy, leadership, diversity, values, democracy, and sociology. He is author of *Democratic Leadership in Education*, published in 2005. *Correspondence*: Professor Philip Woods, School of Education, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert Building, Aberdeen AB24 5UA, United Kingdom (philip.woods@abdn.ac.uk).

GLENYS WOODS is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen. Her research interests include spirituality, educational policy and leadership, and alternative forms of education. Philip and Glenys (with Martin Ashley) were authors of *Steiner Schools in England*, a report for the DfES, published in 2005.

The Annabelle Dixon Fund

We mark with sadness a year since the passing of a dear friend and colleague Annabelle Dixon. Annabelle was an inspired and inspiring teacher and educationalist – a researcher and writer: contributor, campaigner and co-editor of *FORUM* - the journal for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education. She joined Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, as the Times Educational Research Fellow in Educational Policy during a distinguished career in early years education. This spanned the domains of research, publication and the policy environment as well as the classroom she enjoyed so much. In the Lucy Cavendish newsletter of 2005, a piece on Annabelle concluded with the words 'her work continues' and this is demonstrably the case. In this time two books jointly authored by Annabelle have been chosen as the *Times Educational Supplement* Book of the Week. *Learning without Limits* was reviewed by Tim Brighouse, who declared that everyone in education should read it and consequently provided a copy for every school in the London Challenge.

Annabelle's classroom was, in the words of a friend, 'a place of genuine intellectual search.' As a psychologist and teacher she was committed to offering inspiring but grounded experiences to children as the essential basis for such a search. The second book, *First Hand Experience: what matters to children* is dedicated to Annabelle, who died while the book was in press. Tim Smit stated 'this book could save lives' and hosted a two day conference around the publication at the Eden project he created in Cornwall. A bursary scheme for teachers to attend was set up by the authors in Annabelle's memory.

A fund has now been set up at the College in Annabelle's name, with initial donations from three former fellows of Lucy Cavendish. Collectively we sought some way to continue the spirit of generosity, collegiality and intellectual curiosity that she encompassed. We propose to use this gift to establish an endowment fund to enable the College to make modest grants to students. In consultation with friends, family and colleagues it was decided to make an annual award to a student who has made the most of her time at Lucy Cavendish during that year.

If you would like to make a donation to the fund please contact Head of Development at Lucy Cavendish, Meryl Davis (mgd24@cam.ac.uk) or Jane McGregor (jane.mcgregor@educationresearch.co.uk)

HSS

Human Scale Schools

A ground-breaking project helping large secondary schools across the UK develop human scale principles and practices.

To find out more about the Human Scale Schools project and how to apply for a grant go to **www.hse.org.uk** or contact **simon.richey@gulbenkian.org.uk**

Human Scale Education

because people matter