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Why a Steiner Academy?

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ABSTRACT This article examines the curious position of the Academy model in the English school system and how a potential Hereford Steiner Waldorf Academy might figure in this. It sketches the background to the Steiner movement in the UK and goes on to set out the key aspirations and concerns of Steiner educators regarding an Academy. The article provides a Steiner Waldorf rationale for seeking Academy status and suggests a positive critique beyond the piecemeal 'agenda' that appears to drive current education policy in this area.

Introduction

No-one seems to love Academies. There are many passionate defenders of the comprehensive ideal and grammar schools have their zealots. Perhaps it is merely a matter of time; though nostalgia does not seem to have done much to raise affection for secondary modern schools, even if members of the Grammar Schools' Association are fans. But the Academy programme promotes institutions for which there is little obvious fondness. This may not be helped by the fact that their major selling point is as replacements for 'failing schools' or to 'address deprivation', both of which, being based on negatives, lend themselves to tendentious justification before the fact, even when soundly judged. The debate may be fierce, but it seems a cold-hearted one: who loves Academies? Not even their promoters it seems!

Perhaps the incongruence of the Academy beast is a further problem. Academies are described as 'publicly funded independent schools',[1] something that sounds more like a mythical hybrid than a living creature. As with most mythological beasts, the mix has a scary incoherence. The proportions are awry: between sponsor stake and government grant, between the powers of the sponsor-appointed board and nearly everyone else, between laws applying to maintained schools and what some Academy funding agreements contain; things are out-of-kilter. That helps to make hunting the Academy beast a

popular pastime. Books such as Francis Beckett's *The Great City Academy Fraud*, sections of the media, aided by a flurry of reports suggesting that Academies are not as effective as claimed, a small number of notable failures, attacks from teaching unions; there is no closed season. Yet the 'programme' that engenders Academies goes on unscathed in the teeth of evidence or opposition.[2] So why would a Steiner school want to opt-in to the Academy programme and what will a Steiner Waldorf Academy look like?

Background to the Steiner Movement

The first Waldorf School was established in Stuttgart in 1919, primarily, but not exclusively, for the children of factory workers of the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Company. During the social upheaval of the Great War and its aftermath, the factory's director, Emil Molt, had introduced a worker education programme, in part in response to what he saw as the failures of thinking revealed by the European catastrophe of 1914-18 and subsequent events. Rudolf Steiner, an eminent lecturer, social theorist, philosopher and 'spiritual scientist', contributed to some of these classes. From this came the determination to found a school that would (to paraphrase one of the factory workers) 'provide our children with the opportunities we ourselves have lacked.' While Molt, supplied funds and administrative support for the fledgling school, Steiner designed its curriculum and undertook the training of its first teachers.

Steiner's longer term vision was to reform education so it took account of development of each young person spiritually as well as psychologically and physically.[3] The aim of education for Steiner was to facilitate the fullest possible expression of each individual's potentiality in a context of genuine community and civility, something which, he believed, would itself bring about positive social change. Steiner saw this as something that could be accomplished by teaching involving a multi-sensory and multi-disciplinary approach built on a relationship of trust between children and adults in a community of learning. The educational method involved founding teaching on child development with the adult tasked to support integrated learning through and across all domains, aesthetic, moral, practical and cognitive.

The Waldorf School was to be a model for a new type school, holistic before the word had become fashionable. Steiner lectured throughout Western Europe, including in England, on educational themes, striking up an association with Margaret MacMillan, whose ground-breaking work in Early Childhood education in the East End of London remains insufficiently recognised. Steiner also assisted, during the 1920s, in a reform of primary school provision in the Canton of Basel, in Switzerland. By the time of his death, in 1925, there were newly founded Waldorf-inspired schools in Holland, Scandinavia and the UK as well as further ones in Germany itself.

There are now more than 900 Steiner schools and some 1,500 further Early Childhood settings worldwide, taking Waldorf principles into cultures and traditions far beyond the European origins of the Steiner curriculum. In

many countries Steiner education forms part of the general school system, sometimes as independent institutions that are wholly or partly State funded, some as fully integrated education providers within a plural system (most notably in the Netherlands, but also in New Zealand where the national and Waldorf curricula hold equivalent status). Thus Steiner-inspired education has come to find its way into a diversity of social and economic circumstances as well as educational systems, from private schools in the USA (where there are also some Waldorf-based Charter Schools) to the favelas of San Paulo or a 'home-school' for young people damaged by the years of fighting in the Sierra Leonean capital.

In the UK, however, the essentially divided and divisive tradition of publicly and privately funded schools has forced Steiner Waldorf education into an independent sector in which it sits uneasily. In common with other schools working with a distinctive approach and/or philosophy in the UK, Steiner schools consistently describe themselves as being 'reluctantly independent'.

The first school to be founded in Britain opened its doors in 1925 in Streatham, where an attempt had been made to follow the intent of Steiner's advice to place the school, 'not in the East End or the West End of London, but where children from both parts of the city may be educated together.' Steiner, as the son of a railway worker who had had to finance the latter stages of his education by his own efforts, was acutely aware of social position and educational choice.[4] The Streatham school, now Michael Hall School, was evacuated during the 2nd World War and subsequently found premises in the form of large former country house on the rolling chalk downs of south East Sussex, one of a type of country residences that could be found going for a relative song in the 1940s.

Most of the other UK Steiner schools founded at this time established themselves in similar accommodation, though usually on a smaller scale. That has contributed to a caricature of Waldorf education, still persistent particularly in England, as idealistic 'arty' schools providing rural education retreats for the alternative, veggie-organic, sandal-clad middle classes. Not surprisingly, the typical question of prospective parents visiting such schools during the go-getting 1990s was: 'It is very nice here, but what about the real world?', a question readily answered by the significant contribution former pupils make, and continue to make, in a wide variety of 'real world' jobs and vocations.

As the example of the first Waldorf School suggests and his proposal for the first London school confirms however, exclusivity of any sort was not part of Steiner's original intention. In fact, it is clear to anyone prepared to read what he had to say on the subject that the idea of social privilege perpetuated via a select group of minor Public schools would have been anathema to him. As Emil Molt put it:

> The founding of the Waldorf School did not spring from a mere quirk of an individual, but out of the needs of the present time. The school is to be a truly 'comprehensive school', aimed at alleviating a social need, so that in future not only the sons and daughters of the

> affluent but also the children of workers will be in a position to acquire the education that is needed nowadays.[5]

Nonetheless, one of the founding principles for Waldorf educators is that of independence. Particularly in Germany where the Waldorf school receive on average 85 per cent funding from regional government, the schools are referred to as 'free schools' (*freienschulen)*. The sense here is that is these are schools not administered or directly managed by the State. In Steinerian terms, such independence has a twofold purpose. First, Steiner shared John Stuart Mills' view that it was inappropriate for governments to design curricula; he compared to this to 'German national gravy', the sauce the Kaiser ordered should be prepared uniformly in the inns at which he might stop during his regular travels between Berlin and Brandenburg. Steiner's suspicion of governmental interference in the process of education would have been further stiffened by news of education reforms taking shape in Russia following the Bolshevik revolution. The second aspect of independence is more subtle and multi-facetted, going to the heart of what schools might potentially become.

The spiritual practice and practical philosophy that informs Waldorf education (Steiner called it 'Anthroposophy', but described it in a variety of ways) has human development at its heart. Steiner was extremely sensitive to what we might now describe as the potential discrepancy between the explicit and 'hidden curriculum' of educational systems and wanted teachers to be learners who would first and foremost inspire enthusiasm for learning in their classes. Thus the Steiner curriculum is really a sequence of suggestions and propositions, he described them as 'indications', intended to serve as starting points for creative relationships, an interaction between learners: teacher and student, student and student, teacher and school. Steiner believed that teachers taking full responsibility for the policy and direction of their school would remain 'fully grounded in life'; that they would be 'better teachers' as a result.

Correspondingly, Steiner saw education in terms of the Latin sense of the word (*educare*), 'drawing out' and 'nourishing' the deep inner intention, or potential, of the young person; facilitating development so that they would be better able to determine their own role and purpose in the world as adults rather than assuming that the social needs of the present would replicate themselves into the future (for example, policy geared towards assumptions about future economics, something which has influenced much of the European Union's controversial Lisbon Agenda with its unequivocal focus on an economic context).

Likewise, the Steinerian principle of 'collegial' or 'associative' leadership in the management and pedagogical governance of the school has similarities with 'distributed leadership', but dispenses with the explicit linear hierarchy of control implied by the concept of 'distribution'. Leadership in the Waldorf School was to be a co-responsibility undertaken by teams or individuals co-operatively, something that extends beyond the staff body to parents and young people. Leadership could be differentiated but not concreted into a career path;

the teacher of young children was to be valued as highly as the teacher of pre-university students and many schools have inclusive legal Associations which carry areas of responsibility for the schools' wider needs and accountability.

During World War II Waldorf schools in Germany were closed by the Nazis and following the war began a period of recovery. A new phase of Steiner education expansion took place during the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, continuing today into Eastern Europe and Asia. In the UK, in particular, this phase was characterised by more socially-idealistic school foundations. Some of these attempted to dispense with school fees altogether by inviting parents to pay 'contributions' towards the cost of the education, often accompanied by experiments with 'needs based' remuneration. Much of this was influenced by the Steiner-inspired Camphill movement of schools and adult communities for people with additional needs, a parallel world-wide movement, founded by the Austrian doctor and 'curative educator', Karl König.

Thus a major aim of this second phase was to be more socially inclusive, extending what the earlier Steiner schools had always attempted to do through more traditional fee reductions or bursaries, by seeking to become more evidently accessible to families who wanted Waldorf education for their children regardless of income. However, while Camphill Communities have had funding from a variety of public sources with respect to the special needs for which they cater, Steiner Waldorf schools, reliant on income primarily from parents and well-wishers, have found they had to modify the expression of such social idealism in order to survive, often introducing contractually-negotiated or graduated fees. Unsurprisingly, Waldorf school salaries remain relatively low (even in comparison with other independent schools) and most schools are under-resourced.

A Steiner Academy?

From its inception in the early 1950s, the Steiner Waldorf Schools' Fellowship (SWSF)[6] the association for these schools in the UK (currently the small number of schools in the Irish Republic also opt for SWSF membership) has campaigned for some equivalent treatment for the schools here as that which most continental schools enjoy. This campaigning accelerated during the last decade. The SWSF helped to establish the All-Party Parliamentary Group on diversity in education and contacts with politicians of all persuasions has resulted in the current position where the Hereford Waldorf School, a small Steiner school in the village of Much Dewchurch near the city of Hereford is in the final stage prior to signing the 'Funding Agreement' which constitutes the contract for an Academy. Ratification currently awaits the outcome of appeals after refusal of planning permission by the local planning committee. After years of painstaking negotiation, during which Voluntary Aided status and every other potential pathway turned into a quagmire or cul-de-sac, Academy status for the Much Dewchurch Steiner school presented itself as the only route available. Members of the school community (students, staff and Trustees) were

willing to attempt the Academy experiment and, ironically, it had seemed that the problems of school accommodation that had blocked the path for Steiner schools in cities might be easier to resolve in rural Hereford.

Progress has been made possible by the stated commitment to diversity on the part of key ministers and education officials and, on the SWSF side, by a small number of donors contributing to the costs of the SWSF's bid, specifically to assist the development of what would be a first publicly-funded Steiner school in the UK. The school's proposal was accepted in 2005 following a review of research commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills and carried out by a team of researchers based at the University of the West of England.[7]

The Hereford Waldorf school community engaged in intensive discussion and debate before making the decision to go ahead with their proposal to become an Academy. Inevitably there have been a number of pinch-points on the way. Perhaps the tightest of these have been:

- whether the Waldorf curriculum would be seriously compromised
- the position regarding key stage testing
- whether the school could accept the requirement to appoint a Principal
- whether a decision to do so would cut through collegial leadership
- and the effect of admissions' arrangements for an Academy on the school, especially with regard to the position of the school's existing early childhood provision.

These issues have aroused much discussion. Although the SWSF's position has always been that funding would need to be premised on a complete disapplication of the national curriculum in its entirety, there will remain questions around key stage testing, which will still be required, and the relevance of this to the Steiner curriculum. Steiner schools internationally work with wide differences in national and local forms of assessment. In principle, however, schools avoid for as long as possible, explicit comparative testing, preferring to evaluate and celebrate individual effort in individually-appropriate ways. Much of this evaluation involves qualitative as well as some quantative indicators. All involved are aware that Academy status falls short of the systems for subvention existing in many of the countries in continental Europe, or, for example, in New Zealand where the Waldorf curriculum has achieved specific recognition in its own terms, a situation which appears to have no equivalence in English law. The process of negotiation has, of course, involved concessions on both sides. In the longer term the resolution of these issues is likely only to emerge fully once a Steiner Academy is in place.

An Academy at Much Dewchurch, if it can overcome the current planning difficulties, has the potential to continue as an all-age, 'comprehensive' Waldorf school working with the principles of Steiner's vision and curriculum 'indications'. There is no plan to increase pupil numbers substantially above the existing roll of 280 (architects plans are drawn up for a school with maximum size of just over 300, retaining the human scale of the existing school) and

features such as collegial leadership may be enhanced by the role of a Principal, effectively a school co-ordinator, who will monitor and support the collegiate. The appointment, as Principal Designate, of an experienced Waldorf teacher, and former member of the SWSF's educational advisory service, who is currently Co-Director of the BA (Steiner Education Studies) course at the University of Plymouth – the only one of its kind in the country – is encouraging.

Nonetheless, UK Steiner schools are well used to negotiating the anomalies that arise in a national education system that has age five at its onset for compulsory education when Waldorf pupils progress from kindergarten to first class in their seventh year. Regardless of reassurances, the first few years of an eventual Steiner Academy will need careful research and on-going lobbying. One of the clouds resting on the horizon is the current lack of clear commitment on the part of the DCSF to establish independent research, something that many in the Waldorf movement consider surprising. Given that a Steiner Academy would be such a radical departure, examination of its effect and effectiveness ought to be a priority. The SWSF will certainly want to study how Waldorf education fares in the maintained sector.

Inevitably, the potential Academy has also been the focus of intensive debate within and between Fellowship member schools and Trustees of SWSF. Of course, there are colleagues who consider any such arrangement potentially lethal to Steinerian principles. The ultimate decision has been, however, to support colleagues in one member school to take a step towards integrating the Waldorf method with the 'mainstream', placing confidence in them to do so with due care for the integrity of Steiner education.

Why a Steiner Academy? Woods et al [8] provide a comprehensive list of potential benefits to be gained and certain dangers implicit for Steiner schools in the maintained sector. For those most closely involved in moving towards an Academy, the five essentials would be:

- to enable better collegiality and mutual learning between Steiner educators and those involved in maintained education
- to facilitate improved access to Waldorf education and enhance inclusivity, serving the needs of children the current Hereford Waldorf Steiner School cannot reach
- to open a way for greater diversity in the UK education system
- to help clear the path for other SWSF member schools that may choose to do so to enter maintained sector (though word is that this may not be by the Academy route)
- and to provide an effective working model that can demonstrate the Waldorf approach within the maintained sector

Whether Hereford Waldorf School becomes an Academy remains poised on the outcome of planning decisions; whether there might eventually be other Steiner Academies is a far more open question; whether Trust Schools provide a viable alternative model also remains to be seen. While the Academy model suits much

that Waldorf schools are about, there are also concerns about many of the features that have drawn adverse publicity towards the Academies programme as a whole. The Hereford Academy plans aim to address a number these issues. For example, by placing the school's admission policy unequivocally into the context of the local Admission's Forum (not the case for all Academies, especially the earlier ones) and upholding any judgements of SENDIST (Local Authority, Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal) when these apply. A number of Academies have been rightly criticised for ignoring these.

A Steinerian critique of Academies might begin by asking the question: 'Can such schools provide the means to facilitate the engagement and creativity of all those involved in them so that they can assume more complete responsibility in and through their work?' We believe that the answers to the question rest on the extent to which the principle of placing maximum possible creative freedom at the point of responsible action can be upheld; that freedom being supported and monitored by clearly delineated forms of associative accountability.

In the view of this author, there is much potential in the idea of Academies. We are aware that Academies sit within a political structure that has become increasingly fragmented and instrumental.[9] In effect, the direction of policy during the last two decades, or so, has pushed schooling increasingly and explicitly inside systems of economics and power. The contemporary philosopher, Jürgen Habermas has argued that where societal forms are concerned, the instrumental discourse of 'systems' is necessary to sustain fundamental civility, but that these systems, being essentially parasitic upon the meaning-sustaining, meaning-creating processes of communicative action, hold a highly autonomous and predominantly pre-emptive place in social life. The influence of instrumental systems tends to be antecedent to experience in what Habermas calls 'the lifeworld'. Thus the key role of Statecraft could be described as maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between systems and communicative democracy. By embedding schools inside economic and power systems, their primary purpose as centres for the re-creation of personal and social meaning is undermined.[10]

In common with much that happens in political systems, however, the introduction of Academies and Trust Schools represent items on an agenda (i.e. a series of instrumental or systemic actions) without a rationale (i.e. discourse aimed at developing consensus). Nonetheless, a putative rationale has been emerging with the introduction of a number of educational initiatives starting from the City Technical Colleges of the 1990s. It must be said that that rationale remains inarticulate, but for occasional hints and nods from government advisers, and inchoate. But if the latent policy within the agenda that encourages more Academies and Trust Schools (though the latter are for the time being uncertain) were to be followed through coherently, the result would be for all schools eventually to become 'independent' in Steiner's sense of the word.[11]

For education in England, such independence would involve a leap beyond the dangers of excessive instrumental control, and since 'Anglo-Saxon' policy in education tends to spread its influence across the European continent (as continental colleagues observe), the effect of such a leap could be profound. Given the wider remit schools now have, and the obvious need for services for children and families to be closely aligned, this raises vital issues of effective local and inter-service co-ordination and accountability. While diversity may make this more difficult, that should not be held up as a reason to clutch straws of orthodoxy more tightly; lack of diversity tends to stasis in all fields. The introduction of Waldorf or other schools of distinctive character into the comparative monoculture [12] of State education should serve as a catalyst to further innovation and reform. Perhaps it will prove impossible to make Academy policy loveable, but that policy may yet prove to be a turning point in the way the school system works, the current fractured logic falling in upon its own inherent inconsistency. Schools locally directed by their staff in close collaboration with communities supported by a rational system of governance and acting as co-responsible learning hubs? Whether or not we see something like that emerging nationally, a Hereford Steiner Waldorf Academy is likely to prove … interesting!

Notes

[1] See DCSF 'Standards' website, '*What are Academies?'* http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/academies/what_are_academies?

[2] For example, four working papers which were presented at the annual conference of BELMAS 2007 by P. Woods (University of Aberdeen), L. Anderson (Open University), R. Hatcher (Birmingham City University), and T. Wrigley (University of Edinburgh), identified significant discrepancies between public statements and policy regarding Academies and their reality. These papers appear to this author to provide a fair sample of research (not sponsored by government) critically examining the Academies programme.

[3] Also see Woods, Philip A. & Woods, Glenys J. (2006) In Harmony with the Child: the Steiner teacher as co-leader in a pedagogical community, *FORUM,* 48(3), 317-325. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2006.48.3.317

[4] Steiner was born in 1861 in a part of the then Austrian empire that is now Croatia, attending a *Realschule*, or technical school. He covering the subjects required for the higher *Gymnasium* courses mainly by working as a tutor to students attending the *Gymnasium.* This experience as a tutor was a major influence on his lifelong concern for the development of children and education.

[5] From a speech given by Emil Molt at the founding ceremony for the first Waldorf School 7th September, 1919, quoted in *Rudolf Steiner in the Waldorf School* (1996).

[6] Information about the Steiner Waldorf Schools' Fellowship can be found at http//:www.swsf.org.uk

[7] Woods, P.A., Ashley, M. & Woods, G.J. (2005) *Steiner Schools in England.* Research Paper 645, DfES.

[8] See note 7.

[9] This critique owes much to Jürgen Habermas's distinction of 'communicative action' and 'system,' or 'instrumental action'

[10] This argument could be developed further. For example, an 'outcomes orientated' centrally planned curriculum is an implicit statement of lack of public trust in teachers. Since one of the tasks of the teacher is to model learning behaviour from a position within educated society as (in some degree) 'representatives' of the cultural 'lifeworld', this expression of distrust and corresponding dependence upon agencies of government leaves the profession with a highly circumscribed mandate, 'delivering' a curriculum and testing structure for which teachers are not required to take ownership. This critique, however, is a separate point to that of the need for 'accountability,' something which in itself and its entirety, from evaluation to appraisal and assessment, does not inevitably involve the sort of systems 'accounting' currently popular with policy-makers.

[11] John Stuart Mill expresses similar reservations about State control of education in his essay, *On Liberty,* p 239: 'A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation; in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body'.

[12] 'Monocultural' as compared to a truly diverse system such as that of the Netherlands.

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