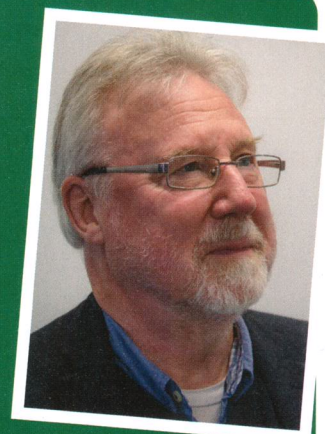


# A Qualitative Education

Long hailed as an innovative alternative amongst schools, Steiner Waldorf settings are described as 'representing a successful, internationally tried and tested approach to education.'

What are the essentials of the Steiner Waldorf philosophy and teaching methods, and how do they compare to mainstream? Can teachers switch systems? Questions ISM put to Kevin Avison, executive officer and senior adviser of Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship...



The philosophy of education that underpins the Waldorf way was developed for workers at the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart in 1919 by the science-writer & spiritual philosopher, Rudolf Steiner. Since then the methodology and curriculum has been developed by the work of teachers and young people and school communities that choose this type of education for its distinctive character & quality.

The distinctive Waldorf quality is derived from core principles, that have enabled schools to establish themselves across all continents (except Antarctica), and have proven flexible enough to meet the specific needs of children in countries as diverse as Germany, Australia, the former eastern bloc, including Russia, the Middle East and, most recently, China.

Although it would take more than a short article to describe those principles in concrete form, essentials include:

- All-through school classes that are arranged to develop positive relationships, support learning, and promote individual confidence. Class groups remain with the same main teacher through the middle years of childhood and receive pastoral care based on a spiritual, moral, social, and cultural educational ethos. Our aim is the development of

confident, creative, purposeful, socially responsible and well-balanced young people

- A broad progressive curriculum geared to meet each stage of child development and individual capacity and interests. The introduction of formal academic education at age six rather than four or five aligns with this. Many educationalists have proposed this, based, for example, on what is now known about typical neuro-physical maturation
- An art of education that integrates movement, colour & form, music, speech and narrative within teaching & learning into all subjects
- Thematic lesson blocks during the first two hours of the morning, in which there is a rhythmic structure that provides balance between activity, and receptive and reflective moments. The seasonal cycle and annual festivals give shape to the routine of the school year
- The use of outdoor and experiential activities, including crafts and intermediate technologies, prior to children consuming contemporary technology and computer science
- Collaborative forms of leadership and management to encourage respectful learning

in a community of endeavour  
The majority of Steiner Waldorf schools in the UK and Ireland are independent. There are currently four Academy/Free Schools in England and three National Schools in the Republic of Ireland.

Teachers need to be resourceful: the teaching methods must be tailored to the particular class as well as school location, and some skill in music, recitation, drawing, painting, and modelling and crafts, is essential.

Many teachers hold qualified teacher status and this is the preferred route to teaching in Steiner Waldorf schools and a good number of teachers make the transition from other types of school. Specific training in Waldorf education is normally a prerequisite for the main class teaching roles and some schools employ transitioning teachers in support roles while they attend one of the part-time courses. Schools provide in-house mentoring and the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship provides school advisers, as external mentors, who can offer consultancy within the classroom context.

As a worldwide group of schools with an idealistic, 'spiritual', outlook on teaching and learning, Steiner Waldorf education and its founder, have attracted some strident critics. Like any institution, our

member schools have strengths & weaknesses and strive to live up to the high expectations within the maelstrom that tends to swirl around education in general. The schools are no less part of that educational whirl than any others and no less subject to challenges all schools face.

Nonetheless, during the last academic year, SWSF members have experienced successes that are not unusual, but are rarely recorded. Here is a typical selection from among SWSF schools:

- 83% of school leavers from Elmfield Steiner School achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, although these young people continue with a full, broad-based curriculum alongside exam preparation.
- 32% of students at Michael Hall Steiner school achieved A\* or A at A-level & their A2 pass rate was 100%
- 87% of students at Edinburgh Steiner School received A-C passes at Scottish Highers, 9% above the Scottish average.
- York Steiner School teacher, Fiona Dudley, was awarded a Silver Teaching Award in the Pearson Teaching Awards 2015.

The full curriculum and overview of the education is set out in: *The Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum*, Floris Books 2014.