Testing times

In the second of our Feature Focus pieces this month on the state of the UK’s exam systems, we speak to Kevin Anson, Executive Officer at Steiner Waldorf Schools’ Fellowship. Kevin qualified as a state-trained teacher in 1973. He taught for five years in the state sector before moving to the Steiner Waldorf sector five years at a Steiner Waldorf home school. Subsequently, he then spent 11 years teaching at Ringwood Waldorf School. Kevin was the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship representative at Ringwood from 1984 until he was elected to the Fellowship Steering Group in 1988. In 1989, he was also elected to help establish the Steiner Waldorf Schools Advisory Service. During this time, he wrote a handbook for Steiner Waldorf class teachers.

In 1995, Kevin became the founder teacher at Alder Bridge School whilst continuing his work for the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship before moving to Steinerbridge in 1999. He has been a full-time member of the SWSF Executive since.

The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship attitude to examinations: GCSEs and A-levels are supposedly ‘rigorous’ and ‘objective’, but are they?

We might grandly ask how much creativity – is lost, or at best hobbled, because of our obsession with paper-thin qualifications and focus on a narrow bandwidth of capability?

Every teacher will have encountered pupils who showed great ability but failed to perform when faced with formal examinations. Formal testing involving scripts written to answer sets of formulaic questions of more-or-less detail and complexity remain a bottleneck activity. Particularly to touch the threshold from statutory school age to the world of adult study or employment.

Reforms, such as the introduction of coursework and continuous assessment, have tended to be treated with suspicion. The brief flurry created by Mike Tomlinson’s 1995 report into reforms of the curriculum for 15-16 year-olds fell at the first post of ‘abolishing the old standard of A-level’. (Michael Trower), despite the wide support among educators for his proposal to introduce national diplomas.

Gatekeepers for higher education and the main professions are, with few exceptions, successful beneficiaries of a traditional system of assessment and the advancement propagated with it. Such systems, however, are methods of exclusion: most obviously, they define winners and losers, but they also define which subjects and learning takes will be officially approved.

Unfortunately, we end up with conventions that fail the majority of children, leading, in the name of ‘rigor’, to a growing population that has been ‘failed’, without becoming educated, trained but not cultivated. So-called solutions increasingly look like those of Einstein’s ‘field’ – a field that is perfectly flat, exactly the same action repeatedly, in the expectation of a different result.

The Steiner Waldorf Schools approach to examinations: We take a different route at Steiner Waldorf schools. Some schools provide formal examinations whilst continuing to offer young people a wide cultural and practical curriculum, with emphasis upon the experimental and exploratory as taught in the Steiner Waldorf curricula. This also involves cherry-picking key elements from the general curriculum, that can provide young people with a comprehensive practical, social-emotional and academic education.

Experience shows that the majority of Steiner pupils consistently produce examination results far better than the national average and pupils progress to a wide range of universities and other tertiary education programmes. In addition, those who have been Steiner educated go on to work in a variety of industries, both creative and those such as engineering, science, academia, journalism, politics and architecture.

Steiner educators’ alternative approach to dealing with examinations is set out to combat various pressures and stresses that naturally come with this form of testing. To illustrate this we asked and provide for our students:

Exercises – Nothing decharges the mind faster than physical activity and the need to be in outdoor learning provides children with plenty of this, even when they are up in the woods. Physical and creative thinking, we find, can only benefit a child in their preparation for examinations.

School trips – Within Steiner education, school trips form a major part of the curriculum due to the added experiential benefit that they can have on children. For example, Class 7 (Year 10) pupils may go abroad on a language trip and in the last year of school, there will usually be a foreign trip to look at aspects of European culture. At Wythamn Steiner School in Gloucestershire, an annual hiking trip to Scotland takes place for Class 10 (Year 11) students about to sit their exams. We find that this has an immense advantage towards de-stressing children and increasing curiosity ahead of an intense period of testing.

Singing – Starting the morning with participatory music is known to produce a positive and productive environment for our students by elevating their moods and encouraging them to study more efficiently. Steiner others is to provide an unhurried and creative learning environment where children can find the joy in learning and experience the richness of childhood rather than early specialisation or academic hot-housing.

Everything – We teach this form or movement that attempts to make visible the tone and feeling of music and speech. This builds concentration, attentiveness and self-discipline, thus better preparing them for the revision period prior to examinations.

Values – We seek to instil key human values to help young people to optimise their abilities. Hard work, determination and good teaching can always build on innate ability. Students’ strong independent learning skills, motivation and enthusiasm for learning stand them in good stead for life later.

Minimising screen time – At Steiner Waldorf schools, computers are generally used by students at secondary age and not earlier. There is growing evidence that too much ‘screen time’ is detrimental to children because it causes a distraction from learning. ‘Children who spend less time on screens are healthier, do better in school, sleep more easily and tend to get more exercise – all vital for a successful exam season. ’

Tackling to someone – All our Lower School students are assigned the same Class Teacher throughout their schooling, and have naturally formed a close working relationship with their education in this way. All the Upper School stage, students will have a Class Guardian, under individual mentor. We encourage students to approach staff if they are having difficulties or experiencing signs of stress due to examinations or for any other season.

Expectations – In Steiner education, the unique qualities of each child are observed, albeit not always measured. However, the development of every pupil is closely monitored, mainly through ongoing formative assessment and in-depth study. Expectations and parents work closely together to build a picture of the child that helps everyone to support that child’s development. An emphasis on formative and on-going assessment reduces the dependence on, and the anxiety related to, testing.

We take pride in all our alumni, last, inevitably some stand out for the public recognition they have obtained for example, the 2013 Nobel Peace winner, Dr Thomas Stoddard, or the video-dancer artist, Katrina Mackenzie.

One of our ex-pupils, a post-doctoral research student at ORF’s Institute in Switzerland, Dr. Christian Gomes, shared his thoughts on our education system.

He said ‘Steiner education has taught me to study for the sake of studying rather than to pass exams, the difference is crucial.”

Please note – the views expressed are those of the author.

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