Working with Inspections

How our schools are inspected may not appear immediately as the most scintillating subject. However, major changes are taking place that will vitally affect our schools. Those of you who work with inspections may have noticed that things have changed in one of its many “consultations” (responses by the beginning of November) aimed at reorganising inspections for all children’s services. This could lead to a mammoth, and probably renamed Ofsted, serving as an umbrella for the inspection of everything from early childhood care facilities (nannies and day nurseries) to Further Education.

But how will the new inspection teams work? Inspectors have to be aware of Waldorf pedagogy and that “educating and caring are invariable involvement. Cambridge Associates are one of the large education consultancies who have carried out by a number of “franchised companies”. Now the inspection of independent Steiner Waldorf schools is also being eroded. Maintained school inspections are carried out by Ofsted, is also being eroded. Maintained school inspections are carried out by Ofsted, is also being eroded.

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Every journey starts with a first step and over the weekend of August nearly twelve dozen new class 1 teachers gathered at the Hereford Steiner School before stepping into their respective classrooms for the first time. In a way, we became a class 1, as we were actively taken through the circle-time and rhythmical work of a morning main lesson. We also learnt more about the art of writing and telling stories and verses. For me, the most significant take-home points from some of the underlying messages embedded in this morning’s work, was the fact that which is the Steiner Waldorf curriculum, so that we began to understand a little of why we do what we do in the classroom, and not just the content itself.

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News in Brief

Grenewich - Unfortunately the Grenewich Steiner School lost its bid for the 150 year lease on an eminently suitable site in the borough. It all looked very hopeful but at the last moment they were turned down. Finding a fitting site that will allow expansion has been a perennial problem for our London schools.

New Orleans - Hurricane Katrina has wrought much damage to the Hill School of New Orleans which in its sixth year had just managed to unite the school in one campus. Three classrooms were lost, buildings and a very suitable site in the borough. It all looked very hopeful but at the last moment they were turned down. Finding a fitting site that will allow expansion has been a perennial problem for our London schools.

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Young Norwich pupils finding a creative way of building their new school.

A New Steiner School for Norwich

Steiner education in Norwich originated with a small group of parents and their “toddlers” meeting in their own homes in 1996. Since then parents and teachers wishing to create a thriving school. Within a year the group had moved to a centrally located Community Centre, where the toddler groups still run, fully subscribed, on five mornings a week with about 60 families regularly attending. These groups have grown from strength to strength, with hundreds of Norfolk’s young children having attended the group since those early days. In January 2003 we achieved Ofsted registration. From its initial one morning session a week a kindergarten has grown steadily to offer daily morning provision to about 25 children, with further places pre-booked.

Our School Funding Committee (later to become the Steering Group) was formed in 2002. A reminder and proposal was set up, a local Steiner school. We successfully negotiated to rent a little-used Methodist Church Hall in November 2000 for both our kindergarten and the early classes of our new lower school. In September 2002 the kindergarten had grown to ten children; the first Steiner school in Norfolk to achieve Ofsted registration.

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First Comprehensive Report on English Steiner schools

What follows is the press release that accompanied the University of Gloucestershire's 'First Comprehensive Report on English Steiner schools' issued in June 2005. This was a seminal event in the history of the school movement in England and further afield. We are therefore grateful for all the hard work and effort that has gone into writing and publishing this report. We are also aware that this document will be read by many, including students, parents, teachers, and others who may be interested in the Steiner schools movement.

There was much interest from the media over the summer and it was all overwhelmingly positive. Although the DfES commissioned it primarily for future funding in mind, its publication has had a much greater reach and help to put all our schools and settings firmly into the educational environment of the new millennium and beyond – a valuable and welcome approach and what we stand for! It also highlights areas in which we should continue to work ourselves as a growing and evolving school movement and underlines the potential that resides in our schools to give more young children a genuinely spiritually based education that provides them the tools to lead a creative, courageous and to the best of their ability.

Christopher Clouder, SWSF

Education in Steiner schools is based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, known as anthroposophy, and the schools provide an alternative approach to mainstream education in the UK and many other countries. The schools have distinctive practices which emphasise the development of the whole child and in particular the spiritual aspects of their development.

In England there are 23 Steiner schools and the research covered 21 of these – 15 were visited and the remaining six were used in the study as well as a survey of Steiner teachers and a review of existing research studies. The study aimed to identify the special features of Steiner schools and common ground with mainstream education, and to find out how these schools might learn from each other.

Current education policy is to broaden choice for parents through diversity of provision as well as promoting the freedom for schools to develop their own innovation, creativity and individuality. The research also makes recommendations should Steiner schools enter the maintained sector.

Professor Phil Woods who led the research says the report identified a number of strengths in Steiner schools and a strong consistency linking between the schools, despite a large variation in the size and resources available. Overall we found good areas of practice such as the early introduction and approach to modern foreign languages, development of speaking and listening through oral work and the combination of class and subject teaching for younger children. In addition, there is a focus on a more integrated model of teaching, with an emphasis on rhythm, the emphasis on child development in guiding the curriculum, and Steiner schools’ approach to art and creativity. We also found that the schools given to children reflective activity and heightened awareness as well as the non-hierarchical, collegial form of running schools, offers a contrast to current practice in the maintained sector and may prove relevant for mainstream schools.

While the report cautions about the difficulties of transferring practices from schools with differing philosophies, it says there is considerable scope for many aspects of the good practice of Steiner schools to inform good educational practice in other schools.

The report also identifies the challenges facing Steiner schools, if they were to become part of the state-funded sector and offers a series of recommendations to meet these challenges, “Governments, LEAs and Steiner schools need to promote a wider understanding of the philosophy behind the schools, and there needs to be a greater understanding amongst assessment bodies of the ways in which Steiner schools are developed and facilitate pupil learning.” We also recommend that, if Steiner schools became part of the state sector, the Government need to ensure that Steiner schools get to participate in National Curriculum. There would also be challenges to be met in the way the school sectors might learn from each other.

The report recommends further research into the relative effectiveness of Steiner and mainstream school practices to strengthen the evidence on which to base future decisions.

The research team: Professor Phil Woods, Dr Glany Woods and Dr Martin Ashley from the Faculty of Education, UWE. www.uwe.ac.uk

Copies of this Research Brief (RB465) can also be accessed at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploads/RB465.pdf

Second Comprehensive Report on English Steiner schools

Study Scholarships for Staff in Waldorf Schools

We are pleased to be able to announce an offer of full funding (bursion costs) for teachers who would like to join an exciting new, school-based, Masters programme for Waldorf teachers. Teachers in the UK are invited to take part in a programme of study, professional development and practice-based reflection to meet the Mesters Level. Designed for full-time teachers and therefore offering a maximum of 4 days and 4 nights, all tuition costs would be covered by a generous new offer of scholarships.

As you may have heard or read, over the past couple of years, in conjunction with partners in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary and the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, the Steiner Waldorf team at the University of Plymouth has been developing a school-based, Masters programme for Waldorf teachers - the Masters level for colleagues in Steiner Waldorf schools in Europe has completed its work. In early September, representatives of the five partners – the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, the University of Plymouth, the Netherlands Waldorf Academy, Comenius Project for Steiner Waldorf Education and myself met in Devon for their last meeting. Practical details relevant to UK teachers and staff are outlined below.

A Final Meeting and Farewells

As Project members gathered in Exmouth in the late summer sun, we thought back on the journey that had taken us from Cotswold Chine School in Gloucestershire. Over the last 18 months, we have been working with 14 teachers from Steiner Waldorf schools, in addition to our internal team at the University of Plymouth, to develop, a school-based, Masters programme for Waldorf teachers - the Masters level for colleagues in Steiner Waldorf schools in Europe has completed its work. In early September, representatives of the five partners – the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, the University of Plymouth, the Netherlands Waldorf Academy, Comenius Project for Steiner Waldorf Education and myself met in Devon for their last meeting. Practical details relevant to UK teachers and staff are outlined below.

In the course of the design phase, we began a pilot programme at Cotswold Chine School in Gloucestershire. As Project members travelled into Cornwall. In August, the project team met in Exmouth to complete the final meeting, with the full-time Project Manager, Lara Newman, co-ordinating progress. She is very experienced, energetic and enthusiastic and has been a driving force – and her team at the University of Plymouth has been a driving force. The feedback from the pilot is positive; the monthly tuition sessions ‘take a lot of work’, but they are also seen as ‘a real pleasure’ and ‘a very positive experience’.

Recognising the value of this programme of professional development, the trustees of Cotswold Chine School have decided to extend opportunities to take part in EMPWES to other schools. It is now happening and that our negotiations for sites in cities are benefiting from Hereford having gone to feasibility.

It was because of the difficulties associated with acquiring city sites that we were advised to try and realise a first project where the site issues were not a factor. This project was a consultant one and the first project to be undertaken in a rural setting. This advice was based on the practical experience that a first project, irrespective of where it was, would give a clear and positive signal. This was key to the success of the development of the scheme for sites in cities is being benefited from herford having gone to feasibility.

The Hereford Steiner Academy feasibility stage is going ahead well with a full-time Project Manager, Lara Newman, co-ordinating programme delivery and enthusiastic and determined to ensure a successful journey through the bureaucratic process that lies ahead. After her appointment was made, we had an introductory day, facilitated by Steve Britnell. These were followed by visits by Lara and two colleagues from the Project Management Company as well as all members of School Council, the DfES, us and the Academy Focus Group. Eurythmy and Gymnasia are school colleagues and the main emphasis was put on the development of the process to ensure that the Academy is about to develop. In July, the project team met in Exmouth to complete the final meeting, with the full-time Project Manager, Lara Newman, co-ordinating progress. She is very experienced, energetic and enthusiastic and has been a driving force.