Hereford Visit

Every month there is a meeting of the Fellowship Steering Group. This small and geographically scattered group need to meet at least this often in order to keep some kind of collective hold on the complex and varied business of representing Steiner education’s national face in this country. I was especially pleased to hear that our January meeting would be held at the Hereford school. It is a school that has been in our awareness and on our agenda often recently, as it makes its way slowly but steadily through the labyrinth of the feasibility study that may, if all goes well, prepare this school to be the first Steiner Academy with government funding. It is not the most cheerful time of year for cross country travel. No snow, but plenty of fog and drizzle came between us and the possibility of appreciating the landscape. But a warm welcome more than made up for a dreary journey. We were able to experience at first hand, the accommodation shortage, as we shuffled from one meeting location to another as precious spaces became available. Our last meeting was held in the nursery, where, in addition to the tiny chairs, we could appreciate the care that can make a simple space into a beautiful environment for the school’s youngest pupils. It was also a splendid (and dry) vantage point from which to watch the whole school walking a lemniscate on the field where it is hoped that the new school will be built - eurythmy in wellingtons.

We were able to meet many of the teachers, both over lunch, and in a meeting where we were joined by school council members, to share hopes and fears for the academy project. Also squeezed into our visit were meetings with two film makers with proposals for a new SWSF DVD about Steiner education, with Mark Evans from the Department of Education and Skills, and with some of the architects working on the plans for the proposed new school building. All this in between our routine sharing of our work and dealing with other necessary business. Steering group work often involves brief individual visits here and there, interspersed with tugged over a computer, so the face to face monthly meeting is personally as well as professionally important. It is an added pleasure when we can meet up with a school at the same time.

Jill Taplin, SWSF.

Overcoming the Eeeek! of Maths

Professor Mahesh Sharma (President of Cambridge College, Boston) offered colleagues from Steiner Waldorf schools and a smaller number of mainstream colleagues a tour de force of elegant exposition at the recent workshop (January 7th), jointly sponsored by the Steiner Waldorf Dyslexia Association and the Steiner Waldorf Schools’ Fellowship. The Professor, an expert in the field of dyscalculia (the mathematical equivalent of dyslexia), had some vital things to say to those who have ever struggled to teach, explain, apply or understand mathematics, probably a smidgen less than 100% of our readers. (As you see, scientific/mathematical precision has its effect!)

Mathematical language, as Prof Sharma characterises it, is a more recent accomplishment than the verbal kind; its grammar not so deep-rooted in human culture and its symbols far less ubiquitous. Although numbers appear frequently in our surroundings, try comparing their occurrence in your local High Street, for example, with the number of words and you immediately notice the difference. Consequently, mathematics calls for radical teaching, from the roots upwards (or “vertical acceleration” to use Prof Sharma’s term). Prof Sharma showed great appreciation for the Waldorf “qualitative” approach, but noted that this needs to be augmented with strong support for “quantification” (and pattern) especially through games. He also made it clear that the conventional, procedural, arithmetic most readers probably suffered (“do this, then that and you’ll get the right answer!), not only ignores pupils who do not readily learn in this way, but the procedures tend to break down at certain key points. For example, most of the ways in which multiplication is taught disintegrate on contact with fractions and again with algebra! No wonder, then, that tutors for the Adult Numeracy Programme frequently reported their students as saying they “understood sums at school until it came to fractions”.

Many of the strengths of good Waldorf mathematics teaching agree with the approach set out by Prof Sharma. His contribution lies in his detailed analysis and strategies to support the children in ascending the ladder of mathematical complexity and abstraction. Many teachers know only too well the difficulties involved in the transition from the rich experiences of concrete and imaginative arithmetic to the inevitable stage at which numerical and spatial relationships must be seen as inner (and reversible) processes.

Kevin Avison, SWSF.

New research from Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology shows anthroposophic lifestyle reduces risk of allergic disease in children

Certain features of the anthroposophic lifestyle, such as restrictive use of antibiotics and fever antipyretics, reduce the risk of allergic disease in children, according to a new study.

Allergic Disease and Sensitization in Steiner School Children is featured in the January 2006 issue of the Journal of Allergy & Clinical Immunology (JACI) and is currently available on the JACI’s Web site at http://www.jacionline.org/. The JACI is the peer-reviewed, scientific journal of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAA).

The study, which focused on more than 6,600 from five European countries ages 5 to 13, showed that children in the Steiner schools, which are similar to Waldorf schools, who are often raised in an anthroposophic lifestyle, have a lower risk of allergy. Austrian scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner developed the anthroposophic lifestyle in which health is a combination of mind, body and spiritual balance; his followers integrate both modern medicine with alternative, nature-based treatments. The study compared the Steiner school children with their non-Steiner counterparts who lived in the same region. The purpose of the Prevention of Allergy-Risk Factors for Sensitization Related to Farming and Anthroposophic Lifestyle (PARSIFAL) study was to identify possible protective factors for allergy associated with the anthroposophic lifestyle. A previous Swedish study showed a reduced risk of atopy, but the specific reason behind that was not discovered.

Information about environmental exposure, history of infections, diet, animal contact, anthroposophic lifestyle and symptoms and diagnoses of allergic diseases was collected through a parental questionnaire. A blood sample was also collected from the children who resided in Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and The Netherlands.

Researchers observed a lower prevalence of current symptoms and doctor’s diagnosis of rhinoconjunctivitis and atopic eczema and asthma and atopic sensitization in the Steiner school children compared to non-Steiner children. Early use of antibiotics and fever reducers, along with the measles, mumps and rubella vaccination were also associated with increased risks of several allergic symptoms and doctor’s diagnoses.
The Waldorf School of South West London arising from the Fire

After a hectic summer, we had a grand reopening of our school attended by local dignitaries including the Mayor of Lambeth, Daphne Marchent and our MP, Keith Hill. Glenn Rawlinson, the founder of the school, was present and told us "It is a wonderful transformation from what was here before and it really is a new beginning for the School, which is worthy of celebration." Ms Marchant congratulated us on a "wonderful achievement" and Mr. Hill was "bowled over, overwhelmed and tremendously impressed" by what we had achieved. We are very proud that we overcame tremendous odds to be able to restart in such a short time. Much of this is due to many donations from the Anthroposophical world - people were incredibly generous.

On the day, our brand new building was adorned with brightly coloured ribbons and we had huge sunflowers arrayed along our walkway which runs alongside the classrooms. Two of our most longstanding pupils cut the ribbon to officially open our beautiful new school. It was wonderful to be back at Woodfields, all together again. Not only do we have a brand new building, but all the eco-friendly paints and lino flooring were donated to us. Work continued during the Christmas holidays and we are finally beginning to feel at home. We could not have done without the invaluable expertise and experience of our financial consultant, Nic Smellie, who acted as site manager throughout the rebuilding of our school; also, the many parents, staff, pupils and ex-pupils who turned up to help. The final finishing touches were made 20 minutes before the ceremony began.

As we enter our second term at the school we have many new children and some new teachers and are now settling into the routine of school once more. The whole experience of the fire has made every aspect of our work stronger. We look to the future with positivity and working together with the other schools in London Sheila Campbell, S.W.London.

Building Bridges

An historic event took place at the University of the West of England (UWE) on the 8th November. This was the Building Bridges Conference led by a team of researchers at UWE - Professor Philip Woods, Dr Martin Ashley and Dr Glens Woods. The purpose of the conference was to open up new opportunities for dialogue and to facilitate sharing and exchange of good practice and ideas between Steiner and mainstream education following the publication in June 2005 of the DIES-funded report, 'Steiner Schools in England'.

The conference opened with a keynote presentation of the report led by the research team. There were further keynote presentations given by Christopher Clouder, Professor Michael Fielding (Director, Centre for Educational Innovation, University of Sussex) and Jane Morris-Brown from Michael Hall School. Dialogue through the conference day was facilitated through plenary sessions and a break-out session into small groups in which potential areas for exchange and mutual learning between the two sectors were discussed and actions to follow up these ideas identified.

Two main themes emerged from the discussions; the first concerned those elements which participants felt Steiner education could valuably take from the best of mainstream practice. These included: parent consultation and engagement, listening to the voice of pupils, collaborative working between schools, partnerships between other services and agencies. In addition, it was felt that Steiner teachers could valuably learn more about styles of leadership, how to access funds for research, support systems, record-keeping and assessment. Part of this could be facilitated through teachers being able to see state schools in operation and setting up ways where issues of mutual understanding could be discussed at a deep level. It was felt mainstream could valuably learn from good Steiner practice aspects of the schools’ work in achieving collegiality and collegial leadership, the centrality of relationships in Steiner schools and the emphasis given to the inner life of the teacher. In addition, the holistic approaches to assessing children, the Steiner schools’ broader conception of the curriculum and basic skills were valued.

Members of the conference resolved to work together in achieving the following:

- Continue the dialogue established in the conference through setting up networks and fostering a broader community of ideas;
- Create specific opportunities for sharing experiences through exchange visits between state and Steiner schools and shared learning projects - rooted in the issues mainstream and Steiner would agree on, e.g. assessment and leadership;
- Organise further similar conferences to the Building Bridges Conference, but located in a Steiner institution and organised from a Steiner perspective;
- Engage Higher Education Institutions on a regional basis as facilitators in shared continuing professional development (CPD) and drawing teachers and schools from the two sectors together;
- Explore the possibility of developing a common language or glossary of terms to assist mutual understanding between Steiner and mainstream educators.

John Burnet, Plymouth University
A fuller report on the Building Bridges Conference by Glens Woods can be found on http://edu.uwe.ac.uk/ced/events/conference.asp
From pipe-dreams to reality

The reality of a first publicly funded Steiner school is approaching as the feasibility stage of the Hereford Steiner Academy gathers momentum. The process may not be unfolding according to original expectations as defined by the Department’s format, however ‘non-conformity’ is the defining feature of this project. It is probably difficult for many of us to fathom or appreciate the degree of flexibility and forbearance that such a non-standard project is requiring from the civil servants and others. It is clearly like no other Academy so far undertaken and it is certainly breaking new ground in many senses of the word. It is through this tailoring of the detail that the vision that Steiner education merits a more significant place in the educational landscape of this country can be realised. This task may be challenging, but it continues to inspire and excite and the progress locally makes all that input of the last few years worthwhile.

Outside professional involvement and interest is not something that Steiner schools are used to but the small army of professionals who are now ‘on the case’ has neither replaced nor suppressed the enthusiasm, passion and willingness of the whole school community to get involved. Indeed, there are not many evenings when the classroom lights are off at Much Dewchurch. However, burning the midnight oil is ensuring that a significant proportion of the school community now has a thorough grasp of what is involved. What is emerging is a ‘third way’, something new, for both us and the DFES that is based on consensus solutions that fit the local situation. This wide participation is not only a safeguard; it is also creating a whole new group of ‘experts’ who will be well placed to advise other schools that follow in the footsteps of Hereford.

At the end of November 2005, Fielden Clegg and Bradley were appointed from the DFES list of approved Academy architects. They may be known to some for the work they have done in the past in various Camphill communities and for the Ringwood School. They are very busy now consulting the school community and the SWSF and they will be seeking the advice of an experienced Steiner schools’ architect in Europe. Their plans should be approved and ready for implementation after the contract with the Government is signed in June.

Sylvie Sklan, SWSF.

Basic Elements of an Artistic Approach: Language Teachers’ Conference, York Steiner School, 27-29th, January 2006

This highly successful conference brought together over 30 language teachers from all over the UK. The sessions were led by Dorothee von Wittenfeldt, an internationally recognised expert in language teaching. Originally trained as an interpreter, Dorothee has been involved in the Waldorf movement for over 30 years. After working as a language teacher in the Waldorf School in Mannheim, she became Head of Languages at the Institute for Waldorf Education in Witten-Annen, Germany. Latterly she has worked freelance as an independent education consultant, training and coaching language teachers all over Europe. She runs several courses specially designed for Waldorf Schools. This was her first SWSF conference in the UK.

Dorothee’s enthusiasm for languages, for the beauty of their structures and for their individual qualities, was evident throughout the weekend as she led us through the stages of teaching languages in Waldorf Schools. She presented songs and poetry for different ages, complemented by Eurythmy led by Fynn Stim, and offered us an introduction to an artistic and imaginative approach in tune with the stages of development of the child:

- unity in classes 1 - 3, importance of oral work and rhythm; the beauty and enjoyment of language;
- introduction of writing in classes 4 - 6, grammar and translation;
- opening out of methods in classes 7 - 9, offering choice and independence in learning.

Teachers particularly regarding the teaching of mother-tongue grammar vital, as a precursor to its introduction in foreign languages.

The delegates were inspired and enthusiastic, though perhaps a little frustrated at the lack of detail inevitable in an introductory weekend such as this. Dorothee has now offered to facilitate a course of further training over the next two years, to deepen understanding of the work introduced at the conference. It is expected that the first part of the course, covering classes 1 - 3 in more detail, will take place in York in September 2006; further sessions for each stage in turn will be held in February and September 2007 and February 2008, at venues to be decided. Details will be available soon, and will be circulated to all schools.

Annabel Gibb, York Steiner School.

Class 3B gardening. Michael Hall

Announcements

Advisors: Colleagues interested in the possibility of joining the advisory service for next year, please apply or more information:
Kevin Avison, Steiner Waldorf Advisory Service, 2nd Floor, 11 Church Street Stourbridge DY8 1LF, or via j.avison@yescomputers.co.uk or fax 01384 374142.

A short letter of application, CV, supporting letter from Chair of Collegiate & names of two referees

Molly von Heide, who died 22nd November 2005, was a class teacher and Eurythmist for many years. She saw the wisdom in and importance of Rudolf Steiner’s gardening curriculum and did all she could to further this often neglected and undervalued subject and was frequently frustrated. I would therefore like to give something on her behalf to any school that has, or wants to have gardening activities and has a gardener. Something to awaken, stimulate and engage children’s interest and love of gardening and the natural world. Please contact F. von Heide 01364644494 after 6pm.
A Further Research Project

Listening to what others have to say about you can be an intriguing, if not challenging experience. In the developing conversation with colleagues in the ‘maintained school’ community, one of the comments that can be heard goes like this: ‘Steiner Waldorf teachers and educators, while powerful advocates for their work and enthusiasm about their ideals, are less vigorous when it comes to opening the cupboards in search of skeletons.’ Advocacy and induction is one thing; critical reflection on the work and the problems is another.

Holding what one does against a critical framework can sharpen knowledge and deepen understanding. The committed pursuit of authentic and concrete questions may throw up delightful surprises, new perspectives and fresh opportunities; it can also signal bad news and tell us what we know we don’t want to know. There are important grounds for taking in the delights and the bad news, since all these discoveries point out a path to enhancing the quality of life at school.

In the heart of winter, on the shortest day of the year, a group of colleagues met in Exmouth for a one-day research seminar. The seminar came in the wake of the UWE research report into Steiner Schools in England, commissioned by the Government and published in June 2005, and on the heels of the Building Bridges Conference held last November. Colleagues from the University of the West of England, the University of Plymouth, SWSF, Cotswold Chine Special School and the DFES met to identify and explore aspects of educational research, in which Steiner Waldorf education could make a contribution. We were joined by Cordelia Bryan and William Bloom, who are independent consultants in higher education and authors. Presentations and discussions on the theme of Spirituality, Creativity and Ecology filled the day. In honing the ideas and thoughts shared, one issue seemed to stand out in offering a worthwhile and much-needed opportunity for cooperation on a research theme, namely - the teaching, learning and assessment of science from age 11 to 14.

Steiner educators consider that the age around 12 is an important nodal point in the development of a person’s thinking. The fruits of early education begin to show themselves as the child prepares to embark on a new journey towards the critical awareness of adolescence and young adulthood. One possible focus for research is the development of ideas of ‘emergent holistic thinking’ regarding the Steiner approach to science education in the period between 11 and 14. In the UWE research report the influence of Goethe on Steiner is mentioned, leading to a ‘view which stresses observation and imagination more strongly than would be the case in the National Curriculum’. There is also talk about ‘the emphasis... on the wholeness of living things’ during the primary years and the fact that ‘a reductionist view of matter associated with orthodox chemistry is generally avoided.’ There might be validity in a project which looked more closely than theses pedagogical approaches have on the ‘emergent consciousness’ of children and adults, particularly in the way they relate to issues of sustainability and ecology.

Another potent avenue of research is the question of assessment. How can a teacher notice and learn about the learning and achievement of pupils when the approach to knowledge and learning is understood to be emergent, happening within the learner, and within a period of time that is not set, nor externally prescribed and referenced? Issues of assessment within the science curriculum may present an opening to articulate creative and innovative approaches to these issues, in the broad context of the ideas, values and practices of Steiner pedagogy. A follow-up seminar will be held at UWE on 20th February, where the initial work will continue, with a view to realising an application for funding to carry out a small-scale research project. Noises arising from cupboards are likely to include not only the rattling of bones, but also the clicking of gems.

Trevor Mepham, SWSF and Plymouth University

International perspectives on learning through play:
Alliance for Childhood conference in conjunction with Mit Kindern Wachsen.

This conference held in Salzburg in October 2006, included approximately 240 individuals and organisations from a wide variety of backgrounds representing countries from all over the world. The common focus was ‘giving children the opportunity to experience a rich and varied opportunity to be children’ and develop according to their own inner law. It included parents, educators, teachers and other interested people coming together to discuss subjects such as: how to handle babies and infants; understanding learning and the development of intelligence; play and creativity; growth through parenting; alternative school models; the connection between school and working life and new developments in brain research.

The key contributors were Joan Almon (USA), Christopher Clouder (UK) and Cathy Nutbrown (Sheffield University) from the Alliance for Childhood, Anna Tardos from the Emmi Pickler Institute (Hungary) William Crain, Michael Mendizza and Fred Donaldson (USA).

The conference provided the opportunity to form an alliance between individuals and organisations raising the consciousness of the problems faced by children today, both in society and education. Play, in all its forms, was the main content of the discussions, lectures and workshops. Fred Donaldson spoke about the relationship between children and adults, particularly an understanding that children have something powerful to teach us, and we need to be accessible to their teaching - creating a space where trust, love belonging, peace and grace become living practices.

Christopher Clouder spoke about how through the forces of imagination we are truly creative and can transcend time and place - it is imagination which joins our thinking and feeling. We need to develop empathetic understanding through self development “thinking with the heart”. To reflect in our heart we need time and space, and this is being taken away from many children - the time and space to dream, think and reflect. Michael Mendizza spoke about his new project called ‘NURTURING’, where the goal is to gather and share best practice and build a support structure within small neighbourhood projects or institutions. “To bring parents, educators and health workers together in a sustained conversation around the world, and to create new communities to support parenting worldwide”. Christopher explained the work of the Alliance. As it is not an official organisation, however it works freely within each individual for the betterment of children today it “is a global state of mind where everyone retains their individuality yet within which we can reach out to each other - to offer and receive help”. A worldwide partnership of individuals dealing with questions and problems faced by children.

To finish with a quote from a child, given by Joan Almon during her talk on presenting the right for the child to experience rich and fulfilling play; “I always have lots of time - I only have to think about it, and its there!”

Janni Nicol, SWSF Information: http://www.allianceforchildhood.org.uk

From the Editor

We always live in changing times however our perceptions of these changes are occasionally heightened. So it is with the contents of this newsletter. We discover a common denominator in that we are finding ourselves in the position of collaborating and working beyond the traditional boundaries of our schools and early years settings. This guides us into a further evolution of our work, into challenging areas and along untrodden pathways. This development is one not only of the Steiner educational movement on an international and national scale, but runs throughout the educational world. For instance, 11 Education Bills have been through Parliament in England since 1997 alone and more are promised.

Given this global phenomenon we can work positively with the fact that Steiner education is spreading to many more countries, 70 at the last count. The first school in Thailand opened in 1996, the Philippines in 1998, India in 1999, Taiwan and Nepal in 2000. More recently we have been asked for advice on training 400 teachers working in the deprived areas of Dhaka, setting up training in Lahore, giving support to our colleagues in Sierra Leone, finding placements for teachers working with underprivileged children in South Bengal, and developing the Waldorf curriculum in a school in Istanbul. There are new initiatives in Gabon, Uganda, Cambodia, Jordan, Dubai and China. If we require a reminder of the spirit of Steiner education as we face the local and global challenges of our times then Gandhi’s words “If we are to reach real peace in our world, we shall have to begin with the children” can stand as an inspiration for the growing tasks before us.

Christopher Clouder, SWSF.