THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW IN THE FLESH – WHAT DON’T ADD UP TO: What does it mean for Waldorf education?

It is one of the small tragedies of modern political life that a research study with 14 contributing authors, involving nearly 3000 researchers drawing on more than 4000 published sources and witness sessions that were part of nine regional “rounds” around the country; that produced 31 interim reports and a final summary of nearly 600 pages, could be dismissed on the day of publication by the Department for Children Families and Schools with one side of A4 paper. Such behaviour suggests that the government’s use of the phrase “evidence-based policy” really means “The evidence that confirms doing exactly what we were already planning to do.” Unsurprisingly, some of the recommendations of the Independent Rose Review funded and tightly circumscribed by the Department, are being rushed into law as we speak.

Predictably, CPFI’s findings do have a great deal of support among educators. At the meeting I attended (mostly Head teachers and associated officials from the south west) there was a strong consensus of agreement with it and one Head teacher spoke passionately about her children and the work her teachers were doing. “We simply need to stand up for education and refuse to accept half-baked initiatives.” As so often finds at events of this sort, a large number of delegates knew something about Waldorf education and are positive towards it. It is humbling to acknowledge that “mainstream professionals” are by no means shoo stewards for the status quo; children, concern for them and the challenges they present us with are rarely far from their thoughts.

It is right that such occasions also invite questions about our own practice and principles. Although the review is concerned solely with primary education, many of its principles also apply to our “all age schools”, for example:

- While we have welcomed the recommendation for a debate about the Early Years Foundation Stage and the idea of extending this upwards into the first year of Primary education, in line with recent reforms in Wales, what other implications would there be if this were implemented?
- In particular, if formal school age was raised to age six, in line with Steiner’s suggestion that the seventh year is the appropriate one developmentally, how would SWFS schools respond? In the light of this, could schools bring the current variable notions of “Class One readiness” into a more unified approach? On the one hand, consciously preparing the foundations for “instant readiness” and on the other, becoming clearer that what happens in Class One builds on those foundations by enhancing and then applying that readiness to a directed learning that is thorough, not delayed, i.e. developing motivation, not waiting for it to happen?
- The report questions the suitability of the Victorian model of the four-yearly Class Teacher. In spite of the introduction of ICT specialists (in particular) and Learning Assistants, most Primary schools continue to arrange their timetables around Year Group teachers. The Waldorf model rests upon the principal that the relationship between teacher, the adult authority, and each developing young person, is the core process between the seventh and fourteenth Class teachers. Steiner has always been prepared to see that essential principles can be expressed in more than one way. Could schools, and especially smaller ones, make better use of the expertise within the whole teaching group as opposed to laying it all into one? Could there be more cross-over between teachers, especially in the later stages of primary education? Given the different expectations and the complicated world our young people will have to work within, do we need to think about integrating specialist teachers into the timetable earlier than has been usual?
- Following on, from that point, but widening it to “school community”, could we ask ourselves the same question put in the report, viz., could we make better use of the resources we have?
- Can we learn from what the report has to say about the need to enhance the ability of teachers, through initial training and continuous professional development to work with and support diversity, positive differentiation and equality of value in the classroom?
- How do we ensure that young people are at all stages encouraged to be active learners, rather than recipients of educational delivery?
- Can we accept the humane and thoughtful set of aims set out in the review and add to them a practicality with “values”, something the authors see as central to Primary education, but about which there is on the day of publication by the Department for Children Families and Schools with one side of A4 paper. Such behaviour suggests that the government’s use of the phrase “evidence-based policy” really means “The evidence that confirms doing exactly what we were already planning to do.” Unsurprisingly, some of the recommendations of the Independent Rose Review funded and tightly circumscribed by the Department, are being rushed into law as we speak.

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THE EARLY YEARS FOUNDATION STAGE IN STEINER WALDORF EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Although this new guidance was initiated by ex-Chancellor of the University of Sheffield, Alan Milligan, the Steiner Waldorf schools (Steiner practitioners, parents and others) who are not familiar with the Steiner Waldorf curriculum and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Local Authority Inspectors and others to understand how the EYFS can be interpreted within the Steiner early childhood approach to education and care. National Strategies and the DCSF were involved in setting it through to fruition. It offers the Steiner viewpoint on all aspects of the EYFS Principles, themes and commitments, as well as on those Learning Objectives.

MEETING THE CHILD – Approaches to Observation and Assessment in Steiner Kindergartens

A report by Mary Jane Drummond and Sally Jenkinson with the Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth and the Steiner Waldorf Early Years Research Group.

This report is the result of a joint investigation carried out by Steiner and mainstream educators. It describes what can happen when teachers consciously step back from directing classroom events, whilst stimulating active creating a rich environment in which children learn. It describes what can happen when teachers consciously step back from directing classroom events, whilst stimulating active creating a rich environment in which children learn.

EYFS EXEMPT

Wystones School achieves outstanding inspection report

Wystones school was one of the first Steiner Waldorf schools in the country to be granted exemptions from some of the EYFS learning and development requirements and has been graded Outstanding in its inspection. Wystones was inspected by the School Inspection Service, which inspects schools in England. The inspection was against the Wystones school Registration No. 20440F. The school had been granted exemptions from the learning and development requirements (incl. communication and language and literacy and ICT early learning goals, and mandatory) and some other requirements. The inspection was carried out by two inspectors from the School Inspection Service, which was due to report by the end of this year.

The inspection report states: “The outcomes of children in the kindergarten are outstanding within the context of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum. In particular they enjoy their learning; they feel safe and are well aware of healthy lifestyle choices, and they make a good contribution to the kindergarten; they are able to set out and work independently and will implement and support, look after and care for one another. They develop good skills for the future, for living in their inside world, and their attitudes towards developing new ideas.

“Partnerships with parents and carers and the kindergarten’s engagement with them are outstanding. Parents commented extremely highly about the quality of the involvement of which they regarded as a good contribution to the kindergarten and their children’s education. They are able to set out and work independently and will implement and support, look after and care for one another. They develop good skills for the future, for living in their inside world, and their attitudes towards developing new ideas.

“The kindergarten’s learning environment is suitable for the children and enables them to develop their skills successfully. It contains challenging insights into the practice of observation and assessment, and will make stimulating reading for anyone with an interest in early childhood education.”

Formal education at age 6+ in a Steiner school.

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The debate that we are resuming with our older pupils is new. Mary Winn’s ‘The Plug-In Dragon’ which was published earlier this year, and in 1977, Martin Large in 1980 and more recently Aric Sigman’s ‘Remotely Controlled’ have raised the concerns of academic and populist back-up for endless parents’ evenings on the subject of TV. Aric Sigman, research group ‘Screen Exposure’ was extracted by the End Devon School Inspection Service, which inspects schools in England. The inspection was against the Wystones school Registration No. 20440F. The school had been granted exemptions from the learning and development requirements (incl. communication and language and literacy and ICT early learning goals, and mandatory) and some other requirements. The inspection was carried out by two inspectors from the School Inspection Service, which was due to report by the end of this year.

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