Welcome to our Spring Newsletter, although at the time of writing, beyond a shivering daffodil or two, there is very little indication that a new season is upon us. Perhaps the content of the Newsletter reflects the same mood: lots of cautious new life and an uncertainty about transition. There is also a need to look inward as well as to wider horizons represented in two extensive reports included here. One takes us to Florence and considers the international collaboration of parents, the other goes right to the heart of all our schools and the delicate mechanisms that govern them. As always, contributions to our termly Newsletters are most welcome: if something is missing from this one then please bring it to our attention, indeed write the appropriate piece, in anticipation of a Summer issue.

How Do You Run a Steiner School?

A conference report by Priya Mahtani, Rudolf Steiner School Kings Langley (RSSKL):

"There can be no community without individuals and no individuality without community. Each needs the other, to become a human being.”
Florian Oswald, Key Note Speaker.

Running a school is a complicated business. When I discovered that we were hosting the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF) conference here at Kings Langley: “How Do We Run Our Schools in the 21st Century,” I was especially eager to attend, hoping for some inspiration.

The conference started on the Friday evening with a talk by Florian Osswald (from the Pedagogical Section in the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland). With 24 years’ experience as a Maths and Science teacher, it was no surprise that Florian was both eloquent and thought-provoking. Perhaps what was surprising however was how effectively he was able to create powerful and evocative pictures with which to convey his ideas. He reminded us that the child arrives at school and indeed life, already carrying a treasure box. The task of education - to draw out these hidden, stored treasures. When the child is ready to leave the school and enter the wider world again, they continue to work with these gifts.

In the Friday evening talk, Florian suggested that a teacher is in many ways like a cook, and if the meal is well prepared, the pupil is easily able to digest the learning. But what makes education digestible? Perhaps this is what lies at the heart of a Steiner Waldorf education. How do we sustain our schools and nourish our teachers and administrators?

Steiner schools vary in size, longevity and approach to school governance. The organisational forms and challenges also vary a great deal, although there are common threads. In this conference we had an opportunity to begin to unravel what lies at the heart of the education’s governing structures, exploring the common threads that unite us all. We listened to different presentations from colleagues representing different models, including Chris Marshall from Michael Hall talking about College, the School Mandate Team and mandates; Trevor Mepham speaking about his experience as Principal at the Steiner Academy Frome and Jeremy Smith sharing the management structure at RSSKL, amongst presentations from trustees and a handful of others.

The conference also touched on some of Steiner’s ideas and intentions for school leadership and management. Kevin Avison from the SWSF took us through a process on the Saturday morning where there was an opportunity for us to delve more deeply into both our individual questions, shared first with partners and then our collective questions, as we worked in small groups. There was then the opportunity to engage in a reflective listening and feedback process addressing a specific and real “live” issue from a member within the group.

Returning again to some thoughts offered by Florian, he spoke about the importance of being sincerely interested in our colleagues. It struck me that what lives in the space in between each of us may be crucially important in determining the health and vitality of our schools.
Florian also spoke frequently about whole picture thinking. If the Waldorf Curriculum offers an ideal backdrop for the developing child, what is the picture that presents the backdrop for our developing schools? I found myself wondering what is the true impulse that lies behind Steiner Waldorf education? How can we breathe inspiration into our administrative structures, whether in groups like College and mandate systems, or Principals in the case of the state funded academies?

Clearly there are many great models of leadership out there. As learning communities, of course we aim to improve our expertise in key areas of curriculum development as we continue our research into learning and pedagogy.

But as forward-thinking schools navigating through the challenges of 21st century living, the inner path of self-development must remain a free choice in the hands of all those involved with leadership and management in our schools. The question naturally arises, how can we support our colleagues, both teachers and administrative staff to be truly committed to this path of inner development?

Florian offered further insights by sharing a picture of a two-winged approach to education. One wing reflects necessary learning and planning and on the other something that anticipates the future and is entirely new. This is the place where we must develop the spirit of the entrepreneur or the innovator. Self-governance both in the classroom and in our schools is of course both complicated and demanding. Finding a way to balance the tension between what is already known and what is coming towards us from the future in our schools feels similar to the path of parenting. Florian generously suggested that there is no better training for leadership than motherhood. Embodying the ideal servant leader, (a term famously coined by Robert Greenleaf), a mother is well versed in putting the needs of her children first and supporting them to develop as highly as possible.

All in all it was a thoroughly enjoyable conference with rich contributions from many colleagues. Even the moments of conscious conversation and connection in the breaks in between were invaluable. The conference concluded with a panel of presenters addressing questions and issues that were raised throughout the process. Although more questions were raised than answered, this spirit of enquiry felt like an important step in the evolution of the Steiner Waldorf movement in the UK and it will certainly be interesting to see where we go from here.

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank Kevin and Jane Avison at the SWSF and Jeremy Smith at RSSKL for all their initiative and commitment to making this conference happen.

**Early Childhood**

Steiner Waldorf Schools and settings (kindergartens) have now been granted the exemptions or modifications requested from certain aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The Secretary of State has agreed to all the exemptions or modifications requested from the EYFS Learning and Development Requirements, and in some cases, Assessment Regulations (which includes the Profile data submission). These exemptions include everything relating to the formal introduction of Literacy, Numeracy and Technology (which could mean IT/Media etc.) Steiner Schools and Settings applied for exemptions and modifications under the ESTABLISHED PRINCIPLES route, opting to make a joint statement about where Steiner schools and settings cannot meet the EYFS requirements, without compromising their ethos and practice. The united application was made jointly through the SWSF. Following this, Nursery World Early Years Magazine included a two page article which has raised our profile considerably see http://news.steinerwaldorf.org/

The SWSF has organised an early childhood conference on RESPECTFUL CARE with the focus on birth to three. It will be held at Kings Langley on the 20th and 21st April. There are three outstanding international speakers, and many varied workshops. It is open to everyone interested in the young child - parents and educators.


**Holistic Assessment**

A dozen colleagues gave up their time to attend a holistic assessment seminar at the SWSF office, on the 16th February, with a small number of apologies. Good progress was made, covering the essentials for setting clearer targets for literacy attainment in first classes. We were also able to agree best practice to do this in a way that helps teacher observation. Although it has not proved to be possible to include this theme within the main programme, there is the intention to take this work further as part of the “initiative space” during the Easter conference. Colleagues who attended the meeting on the 16th will be making contact in due course to confirm this and prepare for the working sessions.
Easter Conference

The conference for teachers will be held at the Steiner Academy Hereford over the Easter holiday. The Conference has two aspects: revisiting what is most essential to us as teachers and Steiner schools, and looking outward to how we are managing the interface with today's world. The next Newsletter will include a review.

News from Schools

We were sad to see the closure of the Exeter Steiner School due to lack of pupil numbers and financial difficulties. However, the good news is that an early years setting The Children's Garden has opened on the same premises, with the same teacher. They have already registered with the SWSF, and they are determined to develop this as an Early Childhood Centre to support the families in Exeter, and the Exeter Academy.

New Plans in Ireland

The Mol an Oige school in Ireland has launched an ambitious appeal to raise two million Euros to build a new School. This state-funded Steiner school, with approx. 120 pupils, opened in 2005. They have enjoyed coverage in the local news as well as the Irish Times but are looking to spread the message as far and wide as possible. Their aim is to find one million people around the world to each donate €2: a simple plan to ‘crowd fund’ the new school building. It will be built on a beautiful six acre site. At present the children are being educated in Porta-cabins on a small rented site which is far too small to support the school's longer term vision.

All support will be gratefully received especially in helping to reach a wider audience. Website links, mentions or articles on websites, mentions in newsletters and links through the Facebook page ‘Build Mol an Oige’ will all help. To find out more details please visit www.buildmolanoige.org

School Readiness at the Goetheanum

Jointly hosted by the International Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association (IASWCE) and the Pedagogical Section, this conference in Dornach Switzerland, took a detailed look at this question. International practice varies considerably and the concerns of, for example, colleagues in Nordic countries which have traditionally had compulsory schooling starting at age seven, tend to diverge sharply from those in which a younger age is the norm.

We were able to hear a summary of research work being done in Germany and recent work examining physiological and health aspects of child development and school readiness. One of these papers traced the development of children’s capacity for memory, making it clear that this remains relatively unstable until towards the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth year. Our UK contribution concentrated upon the question of culture and general expectation and how schools might respond while still meeting the actual needs of this stage of childhood. Just as schools in Ireland and the UK must find ways to do this, so, internationally, different legal and other arrangements call for a nuanced approach that meets the local situation. Just as important, however, is a principled and evidence-based foundation for contribution to educational debate on this vital issue.

A working paper on the question of cultural aspects can be found via the SWSF website (advisory service page) at http://swasviews.blogspot.co.uk

Free Schools Update

Proposals to open three new Steiner Free Schools in September 2014 have been submitted to the Department for Education. All have cleared the first hurdle and been invited for interview. The Leeds and Bristol proposals are both for two-form entry schools, starting small but growing, like Frome and Exeter, to offer 624 places for children from age 4 to 16. The next round of proposals, the final round under the present government, will be for opening in September 2015. There are active groups around the country who are considering submitting a proposal.
Steiner Parents International Conference (INSWAP)
A report from Florence by Janey Lee Grace.

This was a truly international conference, with around 60 delegates from 12 nations. Surprisingly I was the only parent from the UK! Having not attended last year’s conferences in Iceland (where 11 nations participated) it was good to hear the main focus of the INSWAP group (International Steiner Waldorf Association of Parents) was to be a facility where we as parents of children in Steiner schools can be the ‘parental network’. It was all about ‘The parent factor’ in education - where the schools meet the world.

After a talk on how to welcome new parents into our schools, (it was noted that parents have an important role in this and some countries had impressive mentoring or ‘buddy’ systems in place that worked well) we went on to discuss the sticky topic of funding for Waldorf schools. In many countries, governments do not support Waldorf schools financially. In some countries, what you have paid for school can be deducted in tax up to a certain limit.

It was suggested that a great way to initiate talks regarding funding is to invite local, regional and national officials into our schools. We were reminded that in many countries government schools are not doing well, indeed they are failing. Therefore it could be up to us to invite them to learn from Waldorf how to do better because politicians listen to parents more than teachers. The general consensus was that Waldorf Schools should be publicly open to ALL, as private schools are for economic elite.

We were treated to a presentation on the PISA study. The Programme for International Student Assessment started in 2000. Every three years a survey is done globally, focusing on reading, science, or mathematics. When the study focused on reading and asked: ‘Does parent involvement matter?’ The results showed clearly the benefits of reading to children from an early age. There were also clear guidelines as to what education systems and governments can do but it was widely felt that Waldorf schools are already winning on most of those aims!

We heard an inspirational talk by Christopher Clouder on ‘Waldorf’s place in the education revolution’. We were treated to a wonderful film from one of the parents from Norway, about children and childhood today, www.playagainfilm.com

On the final day we discussed promotion of Waldorf schools. Participants were interested in the Wellbeing Festival we held at RSSKL with its dedicated website and extensive PR which resulted in many ‘outside’ visitors and positive feedback, it was widely agreed that we should focus on the positive elements of our schools. In France one school offers small family weekend workshops which raised their profile, in Germany one school makes tiny furniture for Dolls Houses and are known for that skill, another produces a magazine for the local community.

It was apparent that having channels of communication between schools internationally can only be a good thing and it was thought to be imperative that each country has a National Association of parents, in order to be included in INSWAP communication and activities. Anyone interested in championing this for the UK? The next meeting is to be held just outside Riga in Oct 2013, - oh and by the way - the INSWAP organizers have set their heart on London hosting in 2014 – can we take up the challenge?

Floris Publications in association with the SWSF
Towards Creative Teaching, Martin Rawson and Kevin Avison, has been revised by Kevin Avison, Report Verses in Rudolf Steiner’s Art of Education, Heinz Muller and The Care and Development of the Human Senses, W.Aeppli, have been re-printed. You can order these and other SWSF publications from www.florisbooks.co.uk

Footnote: We are sad to say goodbye to Alan Swindell (of the SWSF Executive Group) who has been producing this newsletter. We thank him for all his work and wish him all the best for his new post as Principal of the Steiner Academy Exeter.

Unfortunately we are not able to replace him at present as our income has dropped due to schools being unable to contribute in full to the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship because of the recession. We are looking at ways to support our work - any ideas are welcome (as are donations).

With our best wishes from the SWSF Executive: Jane Avison, Kevin Avison, Janni Nicol, Sylvie Sklan and Alan Swindell.