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The Big Question: Who was Rudolf Steiner and what were his revolutionary teaching ideas?

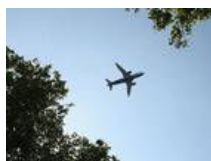
BY RICHARD GARNER, EDUCATION EDITOR | WEDNESDAY 24 JANUARY 2007

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Why are we asking this question now?

This afternoon the Government faces a crucial stage of its attempt to set up the first state-funded school to follow the education principles of the Steiner movement. Ministers plan to back the setting up of one of Tony Blair's flagship academies in the village of Much Dewchurch in Herefordshire, which would be sponsored by the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship. It could open as early as September. However, a committee of Herefordshire County Council is recommending the project be refused planning permission.

What was Rudolf Steiner's background?

Rudolf Steiner was an Austrian philosopher, playwright and artist who lived between 1861 and 1925. He founded a spiritual movement called Anthroposophy, which works on the basis that children's creative, spiritual and moral dimensions need as much attention as their intellectual ones. During his life, he was known as a literary scholar, artist, playwright and social thinker. An important influence on his life was Johann Wolfgang Goethe who wrote that "thinking is no more and no less an organ of perfection than the eye or ear - just as the eye perceives colours and the ear sounds, so thinking perceives ideas".

After the First World War, Steiner was denounced as a traitor to Germany for suggesting Upper Silesia should be granted independence - and the political theorist of the new National Socialist movement (Nazi party) claimed, mistakenly, that he was a Jew. He was the victim of a personal attack by Adolf Hitler, who called on other nationalist extremists to declare a "war against Steiner". His health began to suffer and he died soon afterwards.

How did Steiner's schools develop?

Steiner founded his first school in 1919 for the children of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory workers - philosophising that rhythmic co-ordinated physical exercise helps the brain and that the development of the imagination is essential to a good education. Steiner understood the importance of developing the whole person. A century before the emergence of TV celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, he also believed children should eat wholesome food. There are now 27 Steiner schools operating in Britain and Ireland. In other parts of Europe, Steiner schools have received public funding. In all, there are more than 880 schools, 1,500 early years settings and 60 teacher training centres worldwide.

What happens in a Steiner school?

In a Steiner kindergarten, children typically play with simple unfinished, wooden toys rather than bright plastic ones, to allow their imaginations to develop. A Steiner classroom would have few books and few computers. Colour is important to Steiner's educational philosophy for helping children's imagination to thrive so pupils are instructed carefully as to how to proceed through the colour spectrum.

Steiner schools insist on a balance of artistic, practical and intellectual teaching - plus an emphasis on social skills and spiritual values. Physical development is stressed through a ritualised dance form called eurythmy. Children have the same teacher from seven to 14. They do two languages from the age of six and mental arithmetic almost daily. Calculators and computers are banned until children are older. The Steiner philosophy dictates that screen images hinder the development of thought and imagination, although the school is free to use computers and calculators in the upper school. The Steiner schools also prefer internal assessment of the individual to testing. One teacher summed up the school as follows. A

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visiting teacher would say of Steiner: "Aren't these the schools where children do what they like?" The answer is: 'No, they're the schools where children like what they do.'"

Why are ministers interested?

It is not just the Steiner philosophy that the Government is ready to embrace. Ministers have already given approval for a primary school in a deprived inner city area of Liverpool - Gorton Mount - to become a Montessori school - which follows a method of teaching devised by Maria Montessori, an Italian doctor, at the turn of the last century. There are some similarities between the Montessori and Steiner philosophies. Maria Montessori was primarily interested in children who were considered unable to be educated and argued that children learnt naturally from their own environment.

It is not really a question of the Government supporting the philosophies of Montessori and Steiner - but recognising that some parents find these forms of alternative education attractive. The argument goes: if it is all right for rich parents to pay for their children to undergo this kind of education, why should it not be available to those who do not have the means to pay for their children's education as well?

How would testing of children fit in?

The proposed Steiner academy would take in 330 children from the age of five until 16. It will, in order to receive state funding, have to comply with the national curriculum requirement to have tests in English, maths and science at 11 and 14. Children will also - less controversially - do GCSEs. Existing Steiner schools do offer GCSEs and A-levels alongside their own curriculum.

However, the academy will not have to follow the year-on year-out requirements of the national curriculum and will stick to its own teaching methods. Similarly, with the state-funded Montessori school, it is expected to ensure that its pupils sit national curriculum tests.

Who wants to turn down the school?

Ostensibly, it is a dispute about traffic. There is already a Steiner school on a much smaller scale in a converted barn in the village of Much Dewchurch. The new one will be built on a green field site and, because the number of pupils is to be increased, create more traffic. Behind that worry, though, some councillors are upset that so much money is being spent on a new state institution in the county. The cost of building the academy is estimated to be £10m before running costs, and sponsors of academies are usually expected to come up with a maximum of only £2m for any project. They argue that the money would be better spent improving facilities at existing primary and secondary schools.

What is the future of state-sponsored Steiner education?

It is too early to say. But the principle has been accepted: that Steiner education should be available to a wider audience, and the Government has no qualms about accepting that fact. Even if the problems with the Much Dewchurch site prove insurmountable, it is not beyond the realms of possibility to think that such an academy could be sited elsewhere.

Should the Government fund a Steiner school?

Yes...

- * Pupils from Steiner schools are said to have practical skills that make them more able to cope in the adult world
- * The 'alternative education' offered by Steiner schools should be available to all parents - rich or poor
- * The state system should provide a wide variety of schools in accordance with the Government's belief in 'diversity'

No...

- * Steiner schools have been in existence for several decades - without any state funding in the UK - so it is unnecessary
- * It is wrong for the Government to pay for new schools, when the existing ones are underfunded
- * The Academies programme should concentrate on rescuing failing schools, as was originally intended



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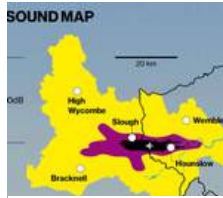
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