Making room for Rudolf

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The world's biggest independent education movement focuses on children's emotional and spiritual development, and provides an alternative to the tests and tables approach of state schools. But despite its international popularity, it just manages to scrape by in the UK. Harvey McGavin reports

The walls are painted a muted shade of pink and the room is furnished with simple wooden chairs. A dozen children aged from four to six, and three adults - their teacher and two assistants - sit in a circle. In the middle on a table are two dolls, a model house, a head of corn and a candle. All is quiet.

A child reaches forward to light the candle and the story begins.

"Once upon a time, there was a young man who saved up his wages and bought a small farm. He worked hard and when autumn came, he had a good crop of corn. He bound the sheaves, then left them in the sun to dry."

Elisabeth Hoystaad, the teacher, speaks quietly and slowly, taking care over the words. She will tell the story of the Pixie Thresher every day this week, from memory, and it is important that each time she does the story remains the same.

This is the kindergarten in the Greenwich Steiner school, where the three Rs are rhythm, repetition and reverence. Since Rudolf Steiner died in 1925, more than 800 schools worldwide have been founded on his belief in the unhurried development of the child as a physical, spiritual and intellectual being in tune with nature. This scene, being played out in the rented room of a south London church, is his philosophy in microcosm.

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The Greenwich school is typical of the new breed of Steiners. It grew out of a parent-toddler group started by three sets of parents, and opened as a school proper in 1999, with 10 children and one teacher. It has grown with each year's intake and now has 61 children in four classes. Every Friday, parents and teachers tidy away the classrooms, two downstairs and two upstairs, off the main nave of the church, so the space can be used for worship at the weekends.

If the school is to continue, it must find new premises by next summer.

Kendall Noyes, a single mother with two children at the school, is, like all the other parents, heavily involved in its daily life. They are pinning their
hopes on a newly vacant art gallery in nearby Blackheath and have started leafleting houses in the area to win support for their plans.

Ms Noyes came across Steiner almost by accident - she bought her house from the school's founders. She was "completely bored" by her grammar school education, and wanted something different for her own children. A visit to the Kings Langley school in Hertfordshire, one of the largest and longest established Steiner schools in the UK, was the decider. "The children all seemed very grounded and sure of themselves as individuals. They were confident, but not in a public school kind of way."

Steiner is the biggest independent educational movement in the world.

Although the schools are state-funded in many northern European countries, those in the UK must survive by charging fees. At Greenwich, parents pay around £3,000 a year in kindergarten, and almost £4,000 after that, but, as in all other Steiner schools, fees are reduced according to income, with parents on benefit being subsidised by up to 90 per cent.

The increasing popularity of Steiner in Britain may be in part a backlash against Sats (there is no formal testing), but it also reflects the desire for a more "environmental" education. Steiner children use nature's raw materials, celebrate the seasons, play outdoors for an hour and a half every day, whatever the weather, and eschew plastic toys, computers and TV.

It's a respite from the hectic life of inner-city children and harks back to the ethos of the original Steiner school (for the children of workers at a tobacco factory in Stuttgart in 1919) as a therapeutic education for deprived children.

Steiner schools strives to balance children's academic progress with their physical development and use subjects such as eurythmy (a kind of interpretative dance) and finger knitting to nurture motor skills. Steiner viewed childhood in three seven-year stages, with the hands, the heart and finally the head the dominant influence on development in each.

Children do not learn to read or write in a conventional sense until they are around seven, and even then the alphabet is taught by mime and drawing.

Mark Chudzik, the class 1 teacher at Greenwich, is teaching the letter "h" with a rhyme ("Hammer down the houseposts, heave your hammer hard, hoist a beam right between, Hu! Working hard") that not only resonates with the sound of the letter but describes its shape and how it is drawn. Children in state schools would do such work two or three years earlier, but to Mr Chudzik, an American who has taught in Steiner schools for 25 years, this illustrates the differences in approach. "What the state sector does well is thinking training," he says. "Steiner education tries to nurture the feeling life of the child."

Another significant difference from the state sector is that whenever possible - and with the exception of specialist lessons such as eurythmy, French and German - Steiner teachers stay with the same class from the age of seven until 14. "You get to know the child so well that you learn their strengths and weaknesses and try to individualise the programme out of that understanding of the child's needs," says Mr Chudzik. (After 14, they are taught by a team of specialists.) He still finds the greatest rewards are in seeing a child grow and develop under his tutelage. He does not lack moral support - his wife, Elizabeth, is the kindergarten teacher - but their relative financial hardship is a source of regret. "Teachers in Steiner schools would like to be recognised for their professionalism," he says. "There have been many fine teachers who have received little financial compensation because they are committed to the job of educating people this way."

The new movement of urban Steiner schools is seeing its inclusive ideals thwarted by lack of funding and affordable premises. The Steiner school in the north London borough of Islington is a case in point. It started 10 years ago, in St Paul's, a grand but derelict church beside a busy crossroads. Little by little, through fundraising, parental help and hard work, half a dozen classrooms have been constructed along one side of the nave. The kindergarten children have the old vestry and altar as a backdrop.

But the rest of the Grade II* listed church - built by Charles Barry and consecrated in 1826 - is a mess of plasterboard and scaffolding as builders work to repair the roof. The school occupies the church on a peppercorn rent and a long lease. "Steiner schools in the city have stumbled on, trying to exist in rented church halls and bits of space," says Jane Gerrard, a parent and the school's administrator. "We are in a better position than most." The school needs £3 million to renovate the church and is hoping to attract lottery funding. "It's hard work for the parents involved because so much of our energy is wasted on survival. The reason they keep doing it is because their children shine here."

But there are signs that Steiner's years on the fringes of British education may be coming to an end. Talks have been going on for several years between the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF) and the Department for Education and Skills, aimed at finding a way to bring Steiner's distinctive ethos into the Government's School Diversity programme.

Sylvie Sklan, SWSF's lobbyist, helped to found the Hereford Steiner school, buying a large disused school building for £21,000 in 1983. Even then it was a bargain, she says. But high property prices have kept Steiner schools out of what she sees as their natural territory.

"We want to be in inner cities, where it has enormous relevance," she says.

"This is about providing quality of education in areas where there isn't the freedom to up sticks and go. It was conceived as a therapeutic education for people who were deprived and that's never gone away. It just hasn't blossomed in Britain."

She senses "genuine interest" in Whitehall for bringing public funding to Steiner schools. "The problem is in the detail; it is difficult to fit something that's not standard into a framework that has been designed for one job. But we will find a way.

"Steiner schools are socially inclusive in ethos and in practice; they are not just schools for posh children. But they cannot be truly inclusive without public funding."

Each school operates autonomously, setting its own fees and deciding what it can afford to pay its teachers. Ms Hoystad first heard of Steiner when she went to work in a residential home in Switzerland for severely disabled children, one of many such Steiner-inspired establishments the world over.

"From the first day I could see these children were being cared for in a way that was dignified; they were able to fulfil their potential and every child was appreciated." It made such an impression that she decided to train as a Steiner teacher in Norway and the United States.

Now, when she meets children from mainstream schools, she is "struck by the vast knowledge they have of the world, but they can't tie their shoelaces. Their own bodies are so far away from them."

After 14 years as a Steiner teacher, she earns just £18,000 a year.
"It's a sacrifice and a rich experience. You have to love what you are doing. Sometimes I wonder, is it worth it? I am giving so much of my life to these children." She pauses. "But here we have so many children who need what we offer in this school."
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