Steiner schools 'could help all'

By Branwen Jeffreys
BBC News education correspondent

Steiner schools, which emphasise developing the "whole child", could hold lessons for mainstream state-funded education, a report says.

The first government-funded study of Steiner schools, by the University of the West of England, comes as one is seeking to become a city academy.

The report, based on talking to 21 of the schools, calls for them to co-operate with the state sector.

But it warns of "difficulties" in combining two very different methods.

Worldwide expansion

Steiner schools are based on the philosophy of Rudolph Steiner, who founded his first school in Germany in 1919. There are now nearly 900 around the world.

While in some countries they are publicly funded, the 23 in the UK are independent.

The schools give priority to educating the "whole child", with a strong emphasis on creativity.

Many children sit GCSEs and A-levels, but they also experience an unconventional education in which hands-on learning through activities such as gardening sit alongside classroom lessons.

They do not have head teachers but a "college" of staff, working in a less hierarchical system.

The research comes at a time when the government is trying to encourage diversity and innovation.

Its author, Professor Phillip Wood, says he wants to challenge preconceptions about Steiner schools and explore ways to co-operate with the state sector.

Early languages

He believes both could benefit from an open-minded exchange of ideas.

Steiner schools, for example, teach foreign languages from...
an early age.

They also offer a broad curriculum in which children continue to learn about science and humanities throughout their schooling.

Prof Wood said: "Steiner schools are one example where you don't have tests. "But they still do develop the capability of pupils so that they are able to take GCSEs and go into further and higher education."

"That seems to say you don't have to do it by tests and targets. You can do it through a more human relationship between teachers and pupils."

But Prof Wood thinks the state system, in turn, has lessons to offer the Steiner movement in England, such as in teacher training and management skills.

Simon Gillman, chairman of the college of teachers at the oldest Steiner school in England, Michael Hall in Forest Row, East Sussex, agrees. He says they could benefit from a more rigorous standard of teacher training.

Talking to Steiner students who have been building seats and shelters in a garden area as part of a project, it is hard not to be influenced by their enthusiasm.

Rod, who is dyslexic, says he has found new confidence since moving to the school seven years ago. His reading age has also improved.

Steiner schools are not without their critics. Some parents would find their philosophy hard to understand, and their approach in certain areas mildly eccentric.

"Movement" and music are integral to learning many subjects. A form of co-ordinated movement called eurhythmy is practised by all students.

But the emphasis on educating rounded individuals will appeal to some at a time when many state schools have been accused of having too strict a structure of tests and exams.

The Steiner Waldorf School Fellowship in the UK has been campaigning for decades for public funding for some of its schools.

One Steiner school in Herefordshire is being assessed for city academy status. If successful, it could open the way for others.

Meanwhile, the Department for Education and Skills is giving £40,000 to a school in inner-city Manchester to experiment with the Montessori method, another less formalised way of teaching.

It is hoped this will improve results at Gorton Mount primary.

Under the Montessori method - which was popular in the 1960s and 1970s - children learn at their own pace and choose how much they study.

Your comments

My grandson was fortunate enough to attend a Steiner kindergarten in North Wales and would have continued his education there had the school not had to close. As a
consequence he is now home schooled as are very many children whose parents/guardians do not feel that the state system provides the sort of holistic approach provided in the Steiner philosophy. Children learn to be valuable members of society in a positive and supportive manner rather than trying to ensure that they all fit a rigid framework. My grandson has an enquiring mind and is encouraged to explore rather than merely accept because that is what the teacher says!

**Carol Jones, Plymouth, Devon**

Last weekend I went to an open day at the Glasgow Steiner School where my neighbours send their children. The event seemed mildly chaotic to me, but it is noticeable how much fun the children have at school and how involved the parents are. These are necessary facets of a good education, and if my neighbours' children are anything to go by, the Steiner system has plenty to teach traditional schools.

**Peter Barber, Glasgow, Scotland**

No matter how much the state sector may want to learn from Steiner and Montessori approaches to learning, as long as its hands remain tied by reams of paperwork and the endless testing of pupils, it will never be able to put alternative approaches to learning into practice.

**Anonymous**