
STEINER SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a research project to explore Steiner school education in England and investigate the commonalities and differences between Steiner schools and schools in the maintained sector. This was in response to recent developments in the maintained sector promoting freedom to excel through innovation, collaboration and sharing, as well as broadening educational opportunities and choice through diversity of provision. The results of the project are intended to inform Government policy in England and help enhance co-operation and mutual learning between Steiner and mainstream schooling.

The project took place between July 2004 and March 2005.

Key Findings

- Steiner education includes all the recognised subjects of the National Curriculum in England and, in addition, covers some subjects distinctive to the Steiner Curriculum.
- Formative assessment is integral to the Steiner approach. National tests are not necessarily seen as helpful, though pupils are entered for examinations leading to nationally recognised qualifications for pragmatic reasons.
- Some pedagogical practices such as the continuity and centrality of the class teacher for the first eight years of education are distinctive to Steiner schools.
- Steiner schools do not have a formal hierarchy amongst teachers and responsibility in the vast majority of schools belongs to the college of teachers.
- Teachers in Steiner schools work for lower pay and in less favourable conditions than teachers in the maintained sector.
- The majority of Steiner teachers hold a qualification from a Steiner teacher training programme, while only a minority hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

Background

Steiner school education provides an alternative approach to mainstream education in many countries. There are currently 23 Steiner schools in England which are all independent schools and, hence, do not receive state funding. Education in Steiner schools is based on Rudolf Steiner's educational philosophy and has a particular view of what constitutes learning, achievement and educational development.

Aims

The main aims of this project were:

- To comprehensively map Steiner school education in England.
- To identify and investigate good practice.
- To explore the differences and commonalities between Steiner schools and the maintained sector.
- To identify the scope for the two sectors to learn from each other.
- To explore the potential challenges to Steiner schools entering the maintained sector.

Methodology

The project's methods comprised:

- a literature review with the principal aim of systematically reviewing published empirical research evidence on Steiner education based on a search of English language data bases;
- interviews and meetings with key national Steiner informants;
- a survey of Steiner schools in England, using on-site, structured interviews wherever possible: 21 of the 23 Steiner schools participated;
- a survey of Steiner teachers: 184 completed questionnaires were returned, a response rate of just under half;
- case studies of good practice: seven schools were selected for case study.

Findings from the literature review

- The research studies reviewed give a cumulative sense of a positive relationship between Steiner schools and learning, achievement and pupils' development of academic, creative, social and other capabilities important in the holistic development of the person.
- Studies also give a cumulative impression that Steiner schools tend to create positive and mutually supportive relationships in schools.
- A defining feature of Steiner education is the attention given to rhythm, rituals, symbols and ceremony, and the close attention given to everyone (including pupils) as individuals and as members of the community.
- Research studies have given less attention to investigating how far the philosophical basis for Steiner education (anthroposophy) is integral to the distinctiveness of Steiner education and what implications this has for mutual sharing and learning with mainstream education.
- Commonalities with mainstream education include an interest in holistic education and certain pedagogical themes, of which the focus on child development would be by far the most significant.
- The research evidence has to be interpreted with caution, however. Studies are often small scale and conducted in different cultural and national contexts that may affect the confidence with which findings can be generalised to other settings.
- The question of Steiner education and social justice issues - how it affects and approaches

gender, cultural diversity, ethnic minorities etc. - is little researched.

- No research was found on Steiner schools entering the public sector, nor on the process and outcomes of mutual sharing of practices between Steiner and mainstream schools.

Findings from the survey and case studies

The survey of Steiner schools and the case studies produced an overview of Steiner school education in England and provided the basis for exploring commonalities and differences between Steiner and maintained school education.

Commonalities and differences

Educational philosophy. Steiner education is grounded in the philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner, known as anthroposophy. This philosophy informs and guides the education in Steiner schools. The principles of anthroposophy are based on a particular understanding of child development, and are the foundation of other concepts integral to Steiner schools' pedagogy such as willing/feeling/thinking, the role of the teacher, the emphasis on valuing childhood, and the collegial running of the school. The Steiner school curriculum is not designed to guide and encourage young people into becoming adherents of anthroposophy. Rather, Steiner education and the maintained sector share the goal of enabling pupils to grow into adults capable of thinking for themselves and making independent judgements.

Curriculum. Steiner education includes all the recognised subjects of the National Curriculum in England. Aspects distinctive to, or differences of emphasis in, Steiner education, include:

- teaching science through observation, imagination and the engagement of pupils' artistic faculties;
- the greater attention given to modern foreign languages;
- the emphasis on crafts, handwork, and practical activities;
- the introduction of ICT when pupils reach the age of 13 or 14;
- the importance attached to art and the development of aesthetic sensibilities;
- inclusion of subjects unique to Steiner education, such as eurythmy;
- the nature and significance of religious education lessons.

National tests. Formative assessment is integral to the Steiner approach, but national tests are not

necessarily seen as helpful. National tests are regarded as taking time away from the teaching of the Steiner curriculum. Pupils are, however, entered for pragmatic reasons and there is evidence of good pass rates.

Pedagogy. Both the mainstream and Steiner education traditions in England regard the individual child as important and schools as having a part to play in the development of the whole child. Steiner education takes a particular perspective and entails a set of practices which relate to each other giving Steiner schools their character. These include:

- the role of the teacher understood as a sacred task in helping each child's soul and spirit grow, which underpins the commitment to each pupil and is the basis of sustaining the class teacher-pupil relationship over eight years;
- curriculum and pedagogy designed to be in harmony with the different phases of development children are believed to go through;
- curriculum activities undertaken for their value in developing the child's soul qualities, not for their potential future utility;
- structure of the daily two hour main lesson, followed by four or five subject lessons for all age groups;
- governing of pedagogy by a strong sense of rhythm that is pervasive throughout the schools;
- use of distinctive pedagogical practices, such as child studies and class studies and meditative picturing of the child;
- emphasis on whole class teaching and the artistry, autonomy and authority of the individual teacher;
- emphasis on the authority of adults as a necessary precursor to the attainment of freedom by the pupil on reaching maturity.

Special Educational Needs (SEN). Steiner schools provide both conventional forms of provision and others that are unique to Steiner education. Steiner-specific methods of SEN would include curative eurythmy, which is claimed to be especially therapeutic in its effects and is a development of the art of movement (eurythmy) developed by Rudolf Steiner.

Leadership and management. The research confirmed that Steiner schools do not have a formal hierarchy amongst teachers and that responsibility in the vast majority of schools

belongs to the college of teachers which is intended to embody and develop the spiritual life of the school, as well as to exercise responsibility for the school's educational activities and management. There is a contrast between the non-hierarchical arrangements of Steiner schools and the traditional hierarchy of maintained schools. However, it is important to recognise that the collegial approach of Steiner education is in keeping with some important trends in the maintained sector, such as the interest in developing more distributed and flexible styles of leadership.

Parental involvement. Parents/carers support Steiner schools in many ways which are common to them and the maintained sector (through fund-raising and Parent-Teacher Associations, for example). The expected commitment of parents/carers, however, is greater in some regards - for example through family support for the Steiner philosophy and ethos and in numerous ways that help maintain schools which are financially constrained.

Teachers. A striking contrast with the maintained sector is the lower pay and the less favourable conditions that Steiner teachers enjoy. The expected level of contribution to fund raising or the maintenance of buildings is often higher than in maintained schools. Staffing levels are, however, significantly more generous than in maintained schools, particularly regarding the deployment of specialist expertise across the 7 - 14 age range. High proportions of teachers in Steiner schools do not have QTS which is an essential requirement to teach in the maintained sector. The majority hold a teaching qualification issued by a Steiner teacher training programme that is not recognised by the DfES.

Challenges and Recommendations

Full recommendations are given in the report and key ones are highlighted here.

Recommendations to explore mutual sharing and learning between Steiner and maintained schools

Informed by the results of the literature review and the research findings, opportunities to facilitate collaboration and mutual learning between the two sectors are identified, and recommendations made to enhance the scope for such collaboration and mutual learning.

Adoption of Steiner practices in mainstream education

has to be approached with caution. Transferring practices between schools of differing philosophies is neither straightforward nor in all cases appropriate and may not achieve the expected consequences because they are removed from the supportive school context in which they originate. There is potential to utilise themes, identified in the full report, as bridges to facilitate dialogue and interaction between the Steiner and maintained sectors.

- Government, local education authorities (LEAs), maintained and Steiner schools, and the UK Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF) to develop workable ways of exploring mutual sharing and learning between the Steiner and maintained sectors which:
 - take full account of their different philosophical foundations;
 - acknowledge the challenges of transfer between schools with different educational philosophies;
 - utilise 'bridging themes' to facilitate dialogue and interaction between the two sectors.
- Government, LEAs, maintained and Steiner schools and the SWSF to promote opportunities for professional interaction and dialogue between Steiner and mainstream educators.

Recommendations if Steiner schools were to enter the maintained sector

Some of the most important challenges are identified in the event of Steiner schools becoming part of the state-funded, maintained sector in England. Initiatives are recommended that could be taken to address these challenges.

Steiner educational philosophy

Challenge: promoting understanding of Steiner education and its foundation in a particular philosophy (anthroposophy).

Recommendation: Government, LEAs and Steiner schools to promote understanding of Steiner education and the educational philosophy in which it is grounded, particularly amongst parents/carers so they are able to make an informed choice of school.

Curriculum

Challenge: providing for sufficient flexibility in a system that prescribes a National Curriculum.

Recommendation: Government to facilitate disapplication of Steiner schools from the requirements of the National Curriculum.

National tests and assessment

Challenge: incorporating Steiner education's different approach to assessment and examinations.

Recommendation: Government and LEAs

- to ensure that they, and agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), are informed by a developed understanding and appreciation, in the full context of Steiner education, of how Steiner schools assess progress and facilitate pupils' learning;
- to support the development and acceptance of alternative ways by which pupils leaving Steiner schools can demonstrate capability for further study and employment, building on current practice;
- to develop in co-operation with the SWSF appropriate ways of identifying and comparing Steiner schools' educational outcomes.

Pedagogy

Challenge: openness towards unconventional modes of assessment which inform pedagogical practice in Steiner schools.

Recommendation: Government and LEAs to ensure that they, and other relevant agencies, are informed by a developed understanding and appreciation of Steiner schools' unconventional pedagogical practices.

Challenge: enhancing the capacity for self-critical review of Steiner education in dialogue with mainstream education.

Recommendation: Steiner schools to ensure that professional development enables teachers and other relevant staff to become better acquainted with developments in theory, research, policies and practices in mainstream education and be prepared to review Steiner educational theories and practices in light of this.

Leadership, management and accountability

Challenge: finding ways of enabling the Steiner schools' collegial system of leadership and management to work effectively in a maintained system which has traditionally required a single organisational head.

Recommendation: Government and LEAs to ensure that they, and other agencies, including the National College for School Leadership, are informed by a developed understanding and appreciation of Steiner schools' collegial structure of leadership and management and to consider how they might adapt their arrangements and expectations for working with schools in order to accommodate collegially run schools.

Recommendation: Steiner schools to ensure they have leadership and management arrangements which facilitate efficient interaction with external contacts (this can be facilitated by drawing on and evaluating innovations already introduced by Steiner schools).

Teachers

Challenge: requirements for teachers' qualifications in maintained sector as relatively small proportions of staff in Steiner schools hold QTS.

Recommendation : Consideration to be given by Steiner schools, the SWSF and Government to commissioning an institution, such as the University of Plymouth, that has expertise in both Steiner and mainstream teacher training, to report on the equivalence of qualifications; Steiner schools to give consideration to increasing recruitment to their teacher training courses of teachers who already hold QTS from the maintained sector.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR645) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB645) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

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