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# Steiner schools – has their time come?

Steiner schools are hoping the time could soon come for them to be given state funding. Are they right?



**Adharanand Finn**  
The Guardian, Monday 30 November 2009

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The Exeter Steiner school, where children learn through play and start formal education later than in most schools. Photograph: Jim Wileman

"Children should start school at six", screamed the national newspapers a few weeks ago on the day the biggest review into primary education in 40 years, the Cambridge Review, was published. It was a strange moment for the 31 Steiner schools across the country. Here was a central plank of their philosophy, which on every other day of the year was regarded by many as marginal, woolly and even backward, being proclaimed to the nation as the answer to its educational woes.

Of course, the Cambridge Review was about more than the age children should start formal education, but those headlines rang like a great call to action through the Steiner community. The Steiner Fellowship, the umbrella organisation for the mostly fee-paying schools, immediately issued a response welcoming the report.

"We are convinced that a later start to formal learning allows children to experience the joy of learning without unhealthy stress or the risk of early burn-out," it said. "We hope the findings [of the review] are taken seriously."

Theresa Trapp, a kindergarten teacher at the Exeter Steiner school, was

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less diplomatic. "It's about damn time," she said. "Children learn so much through play. It's about time we realised that."

The Cambridge Review also seemed to concur with the Steiner approach on a number of other issues, such as the need for a broader curriculum, less focused on "the three Rs", and that testing pupils for the sake of school accountability, namely Sats, was detrimental.

Everything seemed to align further when, a few days later, the archbishop of Canterbury condemned the English education system as "oppressive" for prioritising test marks over children's spiritual or emotional happiness. Steiner has long trumpeted its aim of addressing the needs of the "whole child", including its spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

The optimism all this generated in Steiner schools was only slightly tempered by the immediate rejection of the Cambridge Review's key findings by the government and the Tory party.

But behind the scenes the Conservatives had been making friendly noises towards Steiner schools. The shadow education secretary, Michael Gove, paid a visit to the Meadow Steiner school in Bruton, Somerset in June and came away "very impressed".

"From my visit today," he said, "it is clear to me that the children at the Meadow school benefit from a very nurturing environment, and while the education is based on alternative principles, they also end up with an impressive record of literacy and numeracy. This is just the kind of environment and parental interaction that we should be encouraging."

This was followed by the announcement of the Tories' new schools policy, which would make it easier for independent schools based on alternative methods to access state funding. The policy is based in part on the successful charter schools in the US, many of which are Steiner schools.

A few weeks ago, the Steiner movement held a special pre-election seminar, Moving Forward, with Conservative special adviser Sam Freedman, who turned up to explain how Steiner schools could benefit

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under a future Tory government.

To qualify for funding, schools would need to have a business plan, to be non-selective, to be inspected and, for reasons of accountability, reach a certain minimum benchmark in terms of exam passes, he said. The schools would also need to demonstrate enough parental demand. Most Steiner schools would happily meet these requirements.

Sylvie Sklan, from the Steiner Fellowship, however, is keen to point out that though the Tories may make state funding more accessible, the big breakthrough for the public funding of Steiner schools has already happened – when Britain's first completely state-funded Steiner academy became a reality in Hereford last year.

"The precedent that Steiner schools could be state-funded was set then," she says. "And we have to be thankful to the Labour government for that."

Despite long waiting lists for pupils to join the academy, the reason a raft of other state-funded Steiner schools haven't followed in its wake, says Sklan, is not a lack of political will, but "because of resistance from local authorities whose strict regulations are designed for standard schools".

Crucially, however, under the Tory plans authorities would not have the same powers to block new schools opening.

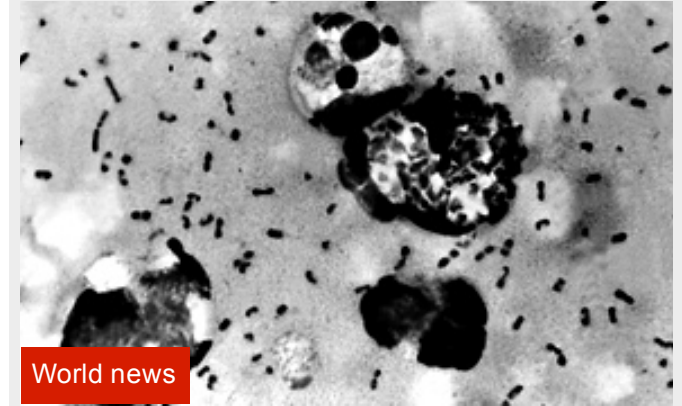
On the same night as the Moving Forward seminar, the world premiere of the film *We Are The People We've Been Waiting For* took place in Leicester Square. The film, produced by Lord Puttnam, is a critique of all that is wrong with the state education system.

The film argues that by focusing too much on rigid academic skills, schools are failing children. It suggests that, at its best, our education system is turning out foot soldiers who may struggle to adapt. At its worst, it is a "scandalous waste" of young people's talents.

Sklan says Steiner education avoids these pitfalls by not simply focusing on the transfer of knowledge and skills, but on "nurturing capacities and supporting the development of the whole child". This, she says, leads to

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adults who are able to think for themselves and excel in an ever-changing world.

Along with the Cambridge Review and the encouragement from the Tories, many involved with Steiner are beginning to think of this as a "moment" for the schools. With one state school up and running, it remains to be seen if Steiner can capitalise on this alignment of voices in its favour and make the leap into the mainstream, as it has in other countries such as Germany and the US; or whether, once all the noise has died down, its unconventional methods will remain on the fringes of our educational approach.

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**NapoleonKaramazov**

01 December 2009 1:11am

11

Go further and make every state school a Steiner school.



**Hemulen**

01 December 2009 1:33am

7

Having spent 13 years in Steiner education (and the last 4 working in a home/school for children with severe learning difficulties & challenging behaviour based on Steiner's principles), and watching in despair as children are being turned into mindless drones in the black pit of free-thinking and open-mindedness that is mainstream education, my answer is YES.

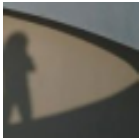


**MisterDavid**

01 December 2009 2:36am

3

Yes please. Yes yes yes.



**Openg**

01 December 2009 3:21am

27

My daughter just finished at the Hereford Steiner school and I'm really happy that she went because it did suit her, but the Hereford school is one of the better and more established schools, not all Steiner schools are like that. I have witnessed some very dodgy situations in some schools that are run by over zealous nuts.

Another thing, in my opinion is that Steiner education works because it is full of children who's parents are passionate about education and go out of their way to search out alternative methods of teaching for their children. You make it mainstream and you expose it to mainstream problems, most bad habits children learn are from their peers, not dodgy teaching.

There is absolutely NOTHING WRONG with mainstream education. If you have a quiet country school with small classes and a mixture of children that come from families with strong value systems then it works, the car crash happens when we go into denial and think that we expect too much from any system without the support of families themselves, because we are too right on to suggest that the poor dears could be toxic.

So what happens here is we hang on the the hope that Steiner education will create rounded children when it's actually US, OURSELVES that do that.



**fghj**

01 December 2009 5:41am

12

No!

Any "school" in which a child can leave having never learned to read doesn't deserve taxpayers' money. And that's before we even get into the cultish aspects of these institutions.



**fghj**

01 December 2009 5:51am

9

Everything seemed to align further when, a few days later, the archbishop of Canterbury condemned the English education system as "oppressive" for prioritising test marks over children's spiritual or emotional happiness.

What on earth is "spiritual happiness"? This is usually a silly a euphemism for emotional happiness, but the archbishop clearly implies that they are separate. Does he mean that schools are oppressive for prioritising education over religious indoctrination?

Steiner has long trumpeted its aim of addressing the needs of the "whole child", including its spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

This is woolly nonsense. Pleasant sounding but meaningless platitudes are not the answer to every educational problem.



**socaleigh**

01 December 2009 7:07am

12

I absolutely oppose this as as idea.

I believe they are called Waldorf schools in the US and there are websites set up for 'survivors of Waldorf' - <http://www.waldorfcritics.org/index.html> is a reasonable example.



There seems to be no discernible curriculum and there is a total lack of scientific backup for the approach. Universities such as Harvard spend literally millions of \$s on education research each year and yet this is ignored by the Waldorf community and instead a hocus pocus of beliefs and rituals are used instead.

I am also deeply unhappy with the concealed religious references. After a year of my daughter attending a Waldorf school, I came away thinking this was a cult and the followers (both students and parents) were not invited to question anything. The parents attracted to this school tended to be on the fringe of other areas of mainstream social norms, such as immunization. I entered hoping that this was going to be a kind environment and one where my daughters imagination would be stretched, but instead it was a troubling year.



### LSEscientist

01 December 2009 8:21am

10

If I go into hospital or my doctor prescribes me a drug it has been evaluated with a random controlled study. In other words, it has been scientifically evaluated as effective.

Why should schooling be exempted? Steiner education might be wonderful, it might be just cranky. We do not know. All we have are opinions of one persuasion or another.

We should give our children research based education not our bigotry.



### Zagradotryad

01 December 2009 8:33am

13

Errm, no. I don't want these nutters anywhere near my child's education.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthroposophy>

The thing about the 'three Rs' (why do we call them that?) is that they're the foundation of everything that follows. It's linked to the old slogan 'If you think Education is expensive try Ignorance.'

I want my children to be taught how to do those three and then exposed to as many influences as possible. I acknowledge that the responsibility for the latter is largely mine.

The rest is up to them.



**wibbly**

01 December 2009 8:34am

11

Ah, Steiner - the faith schools that are acceptable to guardianista hippies.



**Agnosia**

01 December 2009 8:39am

7

@fghj

Your ignorance is interesting. Mabye you should actually learn what Steiner schools are all about first.

Any "school" in which a child can leave having never learned to read doesn't deserve taxpayers' money.

Simply a false accusation.

Many people seems to think that children should be force fed education like a Fois Gras Turkey where they learn nothing about being who they are in the world that they are in. It's simply bad practice.

Steiner Schools arn't perfect but If the state can fund schools based on the archaic beliefs of the religious then surely it can fund schools that at least try to be progressive in their teaching methods. I work in a University and spend most of my time dealing with either emotionally traumatised private school students with good grades and borderline depression, or state school students with no self esteem and paralysing apathy.



**djdavid**

01 December 2009 9:16am

1

@wibbly

Ah, Steiner - the faith schools that are acceptable to guardianista hippies.

Guardianista hippie? We haven't had hippies for yonkers mate are you over 70?

by chance. I read the guardian regularly online cos i live in germany here they are called Waldorf schule (the schools not Guardian readers) they are considered to be a bit silly but mostly harmless



**Agnosia**

01 December 2009 9:19am

2

I should add that i acknowledge the issues surrounding Steiner schools: the religious undertones , the lack of regulation. What we should be embracing is the idea that there are better ways to teach people than the traditional (i.e. archaic) methods that still occur. This is no more true than for the huge amounts of kids with specific learning difficulties who are discriminated against simply because they don't fit the 'model learner' specification.



**haymacker**

01 December 2009 9:36am

5

How about more funding for all state schools, rather than giving more money to private schools for the liberal middle class?



**Regordane**

01 December 2009 9:44am

9

Absolutely no bloody way do I want a single penny of taxpayers' money spent on Steiner so-called education. In fact, I'd question whether it should even be allowed as a privately funded option. Children have the right to a decent education and that doesn't include nonsensical indoctrination and claptrap like "Goethean science".

<http://www.ministryoftruth.me.uk/2009/07/22/pseudoscience-not-a-valid-educational-choice/>

[http://www.waldorfcritics.org/active/articles/Weird\\_Science.html](http://www.waldorfcritics.org/active/articles/Weird_Science.html)



**gonedutch2000**

01 December 2009 9:44am

15

Living in the Netherlands where formal learning in all schools begins at six and the

I live in the Netherlands where formal learning in all schools begins at six and the 'normal' primary schools in the secular/Protestant/Catholic mainstream also look at development of the 'whole child' - what's far out about that? It permits sensible decisions about which bright five-year-olds should move up to the first (three Rs) class early, while slower six-year-olds get the chance to move up 'late' and take on reading only when they're good and ready. Without stigma, too; I hear parents saying 'it's so much better for her to let her play another year', not 'oh dear, they've kept her down, I'm concerned about her getting behind'. I think the UK has a long way to go before that kind of attitude is common - I know I struggled with the 'late' start myself, and to some extent still do.

Steiner schools here are known as 'free' schools and are state funded just like other education philosophies ... they are not so far from the mainstream as in the UK, and in general good (especially for primary, with wonderful crafts / music / drama) but have their share of weaker schools. Certainly they have no monopoly on delivering illiterate children as end-products.



**goneutch2000**

01 December 2009 9:48am

14

... and as a postscript, I don't subscribe to any anthroposophic principles, and I agree that most - not all - of the Steiner philosophy and 'science' is way out there on the wacky and just-plain-wrong end of the spectrum. But their approach to children's development is more sensitive than the British mainstream. Baldly put: a class of six-year-olds will all master reading within a term - some more easily than others. A class of four-year-olds will not; some will manage easily, some will only just manage, and the rest will struggle, some so badly that they don't recover. That is what the Cambridge Review showed, and that is what the British educational authorities have chosen to ignore.



**DoctorChris**

01 December 2009 10:19am

4

In reality many mainstream schools in the UK do not force children to learn the 3Rs before they are ready.

If the foundation stage leader in the school is a strong advocate of play-based learning it is quite likely that the reception, and even year 1, teaching will be protected from the worst idiocies of the national curriculum. But schools do vary widely, so it is well worth asking about the approach taken in the foundation stage when your children are approaching school age.





**Liese**

01 December 2009 10:24am

9

A few people above have posted links to critical articles about anthroposophy but I get the impression that hardly anyone seems to know anything about Rudolph Steiner, the founder of the anthroposophy movement. So here is a little summary to explain his motivation behind opening schools that follow an alternative "holistic" approach:

Steiner was a deeply racist man and he believed that the humans are divided into six or seven different races. According to him black people are black because they have a fire burning inside them that also leads to an animalistic sexual appetite.

According to him the superior race are caucasians and to help them reach their full intellectual potential he devised an alternative education system, based on his "anthroposophic" philosophy. This is complemented by efforts to also maximise physical fitness, hence bio-dynamic agriculture that takes moon cycles into account , Eurhythmic dancing etc.

This leads to a crude mixture of organic nutrition, a sort of nature religion and a softly-softly approach to education which is very en vogue today but people completely forget what Steiner's motivation was: To nurture the "superior race" to overpower everybody else.

In Germany his books have been put on the "Index for literature with youth endangering content" because of his racism.

Personally, I have met a lot of anthroposophes, their children and grown-ups who have been through Steiner (Waldorf) education. A lot of kids are not allowed to play with LEGO bricks, because primary colours are deemed unnatural and unhealthy, playing football is frowned upon, because the sun (i.e. the ball) shouldn't be violated by kicking. Doing A levels after Steiner secondary school is near impossible because they have to catch up on so much.

I'm sure the vast majority of Steiner school supporters here have best intentions and are oblivious to the history of anthroposophy. But I think it is important to raise awareness that Steiner schools are a small, seemingly harmless aspect of a restrictive, exclusive and inherently racist cult.



**Afrochic**

01 December 2009 10:44am

9

I'm a bit biased here as I went to a Waldorf primary in South Africa (they were some of the only multiracial schools at the time) and can whole heartedly vouch for them. The best years of my life.



**dhar1**

01 December 2009 10:52am

4

I think Afrochic answered Liese's post about Steiner being racist quite neatly.

Steiner was actually an advocate of racial integration as are the schools today. A few of the things Steiner wrote (in the early 1900s) could be interpreted as racist, but these have all been disowned by the world's Steiner bodies.



**minnieb**

01 December 2009 10:55am

10

In response to all the negative comments on Steiner schools, I can gather very few of you have ever actually stepped in a Steiner school or know anything about them.

I went to a Steiner school for 13 years and loved my schooling. I can READ and WRITE and am a well-rounded person, as are my two sisters. We are musical, academic, creative, sporty, thoughtful and conscientious human beings and we have our Steiner education to thank for that. My sister actually worked as a primary school teacher before starting a Phd and often had 6 year olds crying because they were so stressed and pressurised with exams...what kind of childhood is that?



**docquentin**

01 December 2009 11:00am

9

Steiner schools are the most successful form of independent education in the world. There are now well above 1000 schools worldwide, many of them increasingly trying to address the educational needs of poor and underprivileged communities. Academic research on Steiner education is mostly done in countries with lots of schools, like Germany. The results confirm that Steiner pupils tend to achieve higher academic grades than pupils in comparable state education.

I do not come from an anthroposophic family but have received my education in a Steiner school. I cannot identify with a lot of stuff said above about cults, lack of achieving basic skills etc. I went on to study medicine and am now working as a doctor. I have always found that having been to a Steiner school was a great advantage, as the general ethos there is to develop a love of learning for its own sake rather than just as a means to achieve short term and externally incentivised success in exams etc. I will certainly send my children to our local Steiner school

success in exams etc. I will certainly send my children to our local Steiner school.



**hamletsghost**

01 December 2009 11:41am

7

I would be more convinced if there was evidence of Steiner schools working for people who were not from a supportive loving family. State schools have to deal with everyone. When the Steiner schools have to handle social discards as well as the more fortunate, it will be interesting to see how well they manage.



**Liese**

01 December 2009 11:51am

9

No, afrochic does not disprove that Steiner was racist. It just proves my point that today's Steiner supporters have forgotten about the origins of that philosophy. I am fully aware that hardly anyone sending their children to Steiner schools would call themselves anthroposophes. All they see (and probably get) is an alternative, gentler approach to learning. As I said before, I'm sure the majority of Steiner teachers today are great and Waldorf schools might well have developed very positively and responded to criticism since I went to school. However, then it is time to distance themselves from Steiner and his views. If Steiner schools all over the world are so great and multiracial, why don't they make the move to distance themselves from their founder?

Importantly, Steiner was far from revolutionary with his views on alternative education, but unfortunately he was very successful in claiming the fame. Maria Montessori developed a very similar child-led approach to learning without the very debatable context (that Waldorf schools used to have in Germany at my time).  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montessori\\_method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montessori_method)

An analogy would be to look at how the Nazis abused the scouts system in the Hitler Youth. You wouldn't say that the Hitler Youth is a great institution just because they did so many nice outdoorsy activities, would you?

I'm not at all against alternative education, but I think people should be aware who Steiner was.

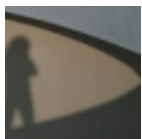


**likeacuppa**

01 December 2009 12:42pm

5

As other posters have pointed out, Steiner schools are by and large full of children whose parents are hugely supportive of both their education and the school as an organisation. No wonder the children feel happy there and do well. But, of course, like all private schools they are selective. They do not have to take any child whose parents doesn't support the whole ethos (so admitting to letting your children watch cbeebies is a no-no, for example). They do not have to take any child with behavioural problems, and they do not have to take any child with special educational needs. On the latter point, some in the Steiner movement will not even believe in the existence of some kinds of special needs let alone be prepared to modify their methods or curricula to take account of them. While the Steiner movement presents itself as gentle and adaptable, in reality the philosophy and curriculum is rigid: Steiner teachers and schools believe they have nothing to learn from the mainstream. So, they are selective, they are socially exclusive, they are doctrinaire. And they do have some bonkers ideas. Children of primary age should only experience music based on the pentatonic scale, anyone?



**Openg**

01 December 2009 12:49pm

1

Sigh...



**darkgirls**

01 December 2009 12:51pm

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).



**ThetisMercurio**

01 December 2009 1:07pm

5

I am not anti so called alternative education although my children's state education has served them well, in fact I'm interested in democratic education, which is one of the reasons I am so keen to give this question a resounding 'NO!'

I have a great deal of experience of Steiner education, a fact I now very much regret. I also know more about Rudolf Steiner than is comfortable for anyone's sanity, so it can't be said I'm speaking from ignorance. The writer of this article sends his daughter to a Steiner (Waldorf) school but is unlikely to have read as much Steiner as I have, unless of course he is an anthroposophist and agrees that Rudolf Steiner



had special clairvoyant knowledge that by-passes scientific scrutiny and rational enquiry. I have sympathy for him, he wants the best for his child and to support the choice he's made. I wish him and his family well. But public money should not be spent endorsing that choice. The fears expressed in these comments are real and important.

The Rationalist Society of Australia ([www.rationalist.com.au](http://www.rationalist.com.au)) were ahead of us when they published a series of articles last year on Steiner school  
<http://bit.ly/6QZPqI>

And this year they wrote 6 facts for parents considering Steiner education  
<http://bit.ly/7qZTpx>

Read these first.



**MrsGrayling**

01 December 2009 1:49pm

5

It looks like the huge anthroposophic machine ( HQ Goetheanum) has cranked into action to find supporters of this contentious "education" and post them here.

Adharannand Finn sends his children to Steiner Waldorf . Has he been to any anthroposophy study groups? Which of Steiner's texts did they discuss?

Like the patients who have just paid the homeopath and got better, those paying the schools often only see the best; this is all the Steiner waldorf schools want you to see.

What they don't want you to scrutinise may never emerge. But listen to those who have delved deeper. Read the accounts of parents waldorf critics - they can't all be wrong.



**Thebee**

01 December 2009 1:56pm

8

Someone has recommended the site of a small, ideologically based anti-waldorf hate-type of group in SF as "information" about Steiner Waldorf education, and writes about Steiner schools: "There seems to be no discernible curriculum and there is a total lack of scientific backup for the approach".

For a description of its origin, history and argumentation of the group, see [Americans for Waldorf education](#). informing the public about "PLANS".

For the basic curriculum of the existing appr. 1.000 Steiner Waldorf schools world wide, see [the Wikipedia article on it](#).

The general [Wikipedia article on Steiner Waldorf education](#) gives a description of the education in question, that is based on reliable published sources.

"Liese" also provides some of the myths about Steiner and anthroposophy, cultivated and published by the first mentioned small anti-Waldorf hate-type of group. For some comments and deconstruction of the myths in question, see [Waldorf Answers](#).

Are Steiner schools cult schools for hippies? A list of a number of [well known former Steiner school students](#) and comments by former Steiner pupils, like the present COO of American Express, [Kenneth Chenault](#), contradicts this.

The present Norwegian Prime Minister, **Jens Stoltenberg**, is a former Steiner school student, put there by his father, former Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thorvald Stoltenberg. The present Swedish Minister for the Environment, **Andreas Carlgren**, is also a former Steiner school student.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Norwegian Government, **Jonas Gahr Støre**, has children in a Steiner school. And the former German Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Hans-Dietrich Genscher**, as also the former German Chancellor, **Helmut Kohl**, chose Steiner schools for their kids.

And are the pupils at Steiner schools more racist than at other schools?

An independent study by a criminological institute in Germany, at the request of the German Parliament to find out how wide spread hostility to foreigners is among German students, indicates the opposite. According to the study, the proportion of xenophobic pupils, hostile to foreigners, was by far the lowest among Waldorf pupils, 2.8%, compared to ?Gymnasien? (High schools) 8.3%, ?Gesamtschulen? 16.5 %, ? Realschulen? 17.4 % and ?Hauptschulen? (main schools) 24.7 %.

Some years ago, **Evelyn Galinski**, former Waldorf pupil and daughter of Heinz Galinski, Auschwitz survivor and for a number of years until his death Chairman of the Central Jewish Council in Germany, who consciously chose a Steiner school for his daughter, commented:

"I personally have had only good experiences during my school time; it was liberal, antiracist, tolerant of every faith and not missionary"

So, what is left of the "criticism" cultivated in hate-type of campaigns exemplified above? Little beyond purely ideologically based cultivation of hatred and smear by extremists, a characteristic in these strange times of ours.



happyez

01 December 2009 2:03pm

6

I believe one reason why Steiner schools are approachable by Tory types is due to Steiner schools being:  
? authoritarian in nature  
? top-down  
? rote learning and highly segmented into what is 'right' for the child.

Steiner is also great for politicians who want to show a 'progressive' side. Steiner is very good at appealing to those who want to rebel, but in a nice way, from the mainstream schools system, which is sometimes a horrid place to be learning.

I have yet to hear about 'democratic' schools, and funding for those. If anyone can enlighten me on that, I'd love to know.

Why do I say Steiner is authoritarian? I am and have married into a line of teachers. My wife has done extensive research on Steiner, as well as colleagues who have taught and were associated with Steiner. So I have learnt quite a bit.

There are several disconcerting sides to Steiner. One is what Steiner talked about - e.g. saw left-handedness as part of a weak body, and that using both right and left degenerated the soul (or words to that effect).

Another is this 'nicey-nice' attitude to everything. Steiner also lacks a visible heirarchy, so you get unspoken of heirarchies which are often subject to abuse. Assertiveness is seen as bad, and a lot of problems are swept up and covered over with this sugary sweetly way of dealing with things.

Boys rough and tumble ways are frowned upon (like the kicking footballs example above). So too is their interest in - well, you name it, reading, writing, playing sport, not translating everything to sitting and wistfully soaking up nature, interest in mechanical things - non-esoteric things before the prescribed age when the soul meets the etheric body (I believe that is 6 or 7, but I maybe wrong) is, repressed. But in this pastel-coloured nicey-nice world children are meant to stay along a prescribed path given to them that opens them up. So I think only reds are allowed for a certain time, then yellows are introduced. One at a time. All for the children, apparently.

I have also seen YouTube footage from a Steiner promo film in which 14 year old boys are doing Eurythmy. Nice flowy ribbons and scarves "dance" (described as "speech made physical" .... uggggh). Which is great, if the boys can also do things that aren't so 'nice'. But they don't, if they are in a Steiner school - well, I hope some schools have embraced rough and tumble sports for the boys to dabble in. I have yet to hear of a Steiner Rugby Club, but again, enlighten me if one exists.

The result isn't changed people to conform to an anthroposophical pure way of thinking, but a lot of underhand bullying (even teachers to teachers), and dropping of kids or parents who question the Steiner system.

The head and body are also split, with the head wining out.

The biggest reasons I will not be sending my son to Steiner is their ardent belief that reading and writing harms the child before it is ready to unite with this earth from their spiritual journey. That is pretty much child abuse to me, and if someone did that to me, I would have hated those who ripped books and Sesame Street away from me that I was independantly addicted to reading and watching at the age of 3.

Steiner can go on about anything else, I dont care, but its this repressing in his taking apart metal objects to examine them (which I can see my son becoming very interested in) which would pretty much make him a non-starter at a Steiner school unless I change his ways. Which I wont (I mean, why for fark's sake!!!) due to some belief some bint in 1921 (who didn't have children) in Germany had.

Basically, if you want to send your kid(s) to Steiner, do the research. Only then, when you have measured the consequences and results from a Steiner education, and they turn out pretty damn good, then enrol them. Now, the state of other schools is another whole rant. But this one is about Steiner.

Oh, one last thing. Those who defend Steiner come up with a non-rational defense in that "well public/private/religious/state etc schools turn out depressed, anxious, cog produced children who need therapy". Well, hello. Just because X school does Y, doesnt make your school suddenly better. Oooo that line of thinking really gets my goat up. That's like saying "hey, eating too much chocolate is really bad for you, so that makes bacon the superior foodstuff to only eat".

Etc.



**happyez**

01 December 2009 2:10pm

3

Er, addendum - "The head and body are also split, with the head wining out" should read "The emphasis of the head and mind, and attention to the body are also split, with the head wining out. Very few body-based activities are encouraged, with sport and physical/creative activities relegated to the periphery".

Or something like that .... ..... and this was my first post to the Guardian. Damn.





RedJen

01 December 2009 2:54pm

4

It's so nice to see the old Waldorf critic brigade out again, I'd forgotten the pleasures of reading acres and acres of this stuff.

I have no doubt that people have had bad experiences in Steiner Schools and I feel very sorry that it has hurt them so much they have to spend hour upon hour looking for ways to vent their feelings.

Steiner Schools, just like State Schools, are in no way perfect, nor do they suit every child, or every parent for that matter. Even as someone who works in a Steiner School, where my child is also a pupil, I have occasionally been put off by the passion of some people involved in Steiner Schools. However in my experience most of the unhappy incidents that have happened in my time here have almost invariably been down to someone's expectations, whether it's the family's or the school's, not being clear at some point.

We made the decision to send our child to this school six years ago, long before I began work there (I am not a teacher) and at times it has been a testing journey for us as parents. But the striking thing is that our child has never wavered and it has always been apparent that, whether or not we got on with a particular part of the school, our child was enjoying every second.

I do not have a horror of State education/TV/Football or any of the other things mentioned above, neither does anyone else I know (apart from maybe the football - we live in a non-Premiership town, so it's a bit boring). I've never known anyone snatch a book away from a child to stop them being poisoned by the reading demon.

All I know is that the style of education offered by my local school suits my child very well. I agree with the person way above here who made the point about nice, rural quiet schools and that may well be the niche that some Steiner Schools fit into. Ours does not, but in almost every respect, this school provides the same educational experience as I had in the nice, quiet, rural school that I went to. That's one of the things I like about it.

Incidentally on a couple of technical points:

Regulation - All UK Steiner Schools are registered with DCSF and inspected according to Ofsted guidance in the same way and as all other schools.

Special educational needs - no registered school has a choice about taking children with SEN unless the school can argue that it cannot meet the child's needs.



### Kleistphile

01 December 2009 3:05pm

What a disappointment...I read the headline and thought it must be referring to George, not Rudolf.



### ThetisMercurio

01 December 2009 3:53pm

5

I don't understand what RedJen means by the 'Waldorf Critic brigade'.

Perhaps that ungenerous comment implies that those who have had negative experience of a school system which they believe to be systemic, not individual to their case and are concerned that its pedagogy not be endorsed by state funding, should just shut up? Maybe so that others can find out for themselves?

At any rate I can assure him/her that in spite of very little negative consequences for my own children, it's the pedagogy of Steiner Waldorf schools that I believe has no place at all in UK education. The book-list of the now suspended teacher training BA at the University of Plymouth, which is now in the public domain, is worth reading.

I have no objection at all to small, quiet schools with outdoor play, wherever these are possible. But we should aim for improved early years' provision without the baleful influence of anthroposophy.



### pointythings

01 December 2009 4:22pm

6

My main objection to the Steiner way of teaching is their rigid adherence to the belief that a child is not ready to learn to read or write until they are 7. This is set in stone, and I've seen the impact it has had on some friends of mine who were keen anthroposophists. Their extremely gifted and intellectually able daughter gradually turned into a frustrated monster because she was not allowed to reach for the intellectual stimulation her growing mind required. Children are not machines, they are not all the same, and the Steiner philosophy - like any other rigid system - will not take account of this. Parents are of course free to make their choices, but they also have a duty to look after the needs of the individual who is their child. We need flexibility in state education, not the addition of yet another dogma to the range that is already on offer.



## pointythings

01 December 2009 4:23pm

not allowed to reach for the intellectual simulation her growing mind required.

'stimulation'. Obviously.



## darkgirls

01 December 2009 4:52pm

8

Curious, my post was deleted.

I'll try posting again without the links, one was to Waldorf Watch, an excellent site worth googling.

For anyone who has any doubt that these schools revolve around **anthroposophy** look at the reading list that the teachers use for training taken from an excellent article at Liberal Conspiracy -

Try reading the books, or asking the lecturers what they actually teach in their anthroposophy classes, - The Image of the Human being derived from Anthroposophy for instance, in order to prepare students for teaching at Steiner school. And why, since they spend so much time telling people anthroposophy isn't taught to the children, why is it taught to the teachers?

I would love to know how many of the decision makers who are considering throwing around huge sums of public money have read any work by Steiner or have a clue about anthroposophical belief. The teacher training material gives a little clue.....

Should it matter that **karma, reincarnation, clairvoyance, "creationism"** & the reality of devils, angels, gnomes & higher worlds form the basis of this education? Some may say not. But at least people should have the choice to know that belief in karma, medieval temperaments, and clairvoyance are being used with their children. Shouldn't they?

Minnieb, I have experience of Steiner schools. Have you any thoughts about anthroposophy? It's always interesting to hear ex students views; I know of some who loved Steiner school and some who'd rather put it behind them. Have you any thoughts about anthroposophy?

It's easy to confuse racism with bigotry. People in Steiner schools are generally charming, good people. When they are trained to believe certain spiritual "truths" and "laws", trained to use these in the classroom and rarely question them, one has to

query the pedagogy that espouses them; all roads lead back to anthroposophy.

dhar1, you said

"A few of the things Steiner wrote (in the early 1900s) could be interpreted as racist, but these have all been disowned by the world's Steiner bodies."

I'm sorry but this is inaccurate. You would have to be pretty strange not to interpret some of Steiner's work as racist, & there is a great deal of it. Much of this material is kept from those who aren't "ready" to receive or understand it; this is why anthroposophy is an "esoteric" belief system. His cosmology embraces the belief that man reincarnates through the races, from dark to light skin. The danger lies in the fact that a Steiner worshipping acolyte (there are apparently many) may believe this is the right way to go..... imo dangerous where children or people with learning difficulties are concerned.

Could you point me to where the world's Steiner bodies have "disowned" these anthroposophical beliefs? They say they don't *discriminate* about race, religion etc, but that isn't the same as disowning what Steiner wrote and taught. To be cynical, there is the idea that those with darker skins can be helped to reincarnate in a lighter one next time round by anthroposophy.....

These schools are based on supernatural nonsense, they are entirely anti science and anti reason.

Very soon I'm sure there will be a flurry of posts linking to pro waldorf sites, by their owner.



**threesons**

01 December 2009 5:08pm

2

Some objections to Steiner schools seem to be about ideology, or religiosity. People all over the world regularly kill each other over this. Why should fights over the validity of Steiner education be any different, I suppose? I'm not joining in that fight here. Believe what you believe and then see for yourself if a school near you will serve you in that.

Other objections seem to be about exclusivity: how can Steiner schools be anything but if they are not state funded? It's tautologous. In my experience, many teachers and parents involved in them have generous hearts and minds and would prefer to offer their education to any child or family that wants it, whether they have SEN, no money, difficult backgrounds ... whatever. They are not always actually able to. I'm more concerned about the accusations that children don't learn enough of the right things in Steiner schools. This is important. It is also relevant to discussion of state schools. There is work to do in the Steiner Waldorf movement in this country to improve teaching methods and, very likely, in standards of attainment. (If you look in

your own backyard, you might see there's room for improvement there too! :) I would also like to see more outreach and openness - couldn't the best things about Steiner education be shared more generously with the rest of the educational world. Why can't state teachers cherry pick from us (yes, I am a teacher?) State funding would allow cross-fertilisation in a moderate and healthy way. There is also much to celebrate in the successful way that Steiner schools meet the human being in the majority of their schools, most of the time.

By all means, research Steiner himself (though is there much point these days? He died almost 100 years ago.) Research kids who are there, were there, want to be there ... there's nothing to hide.



**likeacuppa**

01 December 2009 5:51pm

3

RedJen said: Special educational needs - no registered school has a choice about taking children with SEN unless the school can argue that it cannot meet the child's needs.

Actually this is not quite true. All registered schools have to take a child with a Statement of SEN if the statement names that school. They do not have to otherwise. As statements are increasingly hard to come by most children with SEN do not have them. Steiner schools, like all other private schools, can simply pick and choose – and do.

And I repeat: is there nothing the Steiner movement can learn from mainstream state education, or does the influence all have to go the other way?



**darkgirls**

01 December 2009 6:20pm

7

<http://bit.ly/725cgg> sorry to link to the Telegraph, but it is relevant. Steiner Academy scores "0" in sats....."Academy is the "worst" school".....



**ThetisMercurio**

01 December 2009 6:51pm

7

threesons: what on earth does that mean: 'meet the human being'? As a teacher in a Steiner Waldorf school, what do you imagine you're doing?

And what do you think teachers in other settings are not doing?



**RedJen**

01 December 2009 7:42pm

1

There are plenty of things Steiner Schools can learn from other schools, and certainly where I live the exchange is not all one way by any means. It really should not be a case of "Steiner versus mainstream", we are not in competition.

Just as I know that my child would not have thrived had we continued with another type of education, I know many children who have simply thrived in mainstream and would have struggled in a Steiner school. By the same token, I know many children who for many different reasons have struggled in other local schools but have come to our school and thrived. This is not about competition but about choice.

And yes the Waldorf critics do have a part to play in informed choice. As I said before, there are people with genuine concerns about Steiner education from their own experiences. They have very valid points to make and views that need to be heard. However, it would be nice to see some of the same "generosity" , as thetismurcurio puts it, coming in the other direction.



**AMother**

01 December 2009 9:23pm

4

RedJen, we put our little children into your hands, I don't think we could be any more generous than that.



**youandme**

01 December 2009 10:26pm

2

The state funding of schools using different approaches should be welcomed. That would give parents a genuine choice, as opposed to the current 'choice' of schools all offering the same curriculum delivered in the same way.



**murrayminter**

02 December 2009 12:51pm

7



I am an ex-Steiner pupil (13 years) who left this form of education to take my A levels (3A's Maths, Chemistry, Biology), have a first class science degree and am now a chartered accountant. My two sisters and brother all have similar stories and results. Do any of us feel the Steiner school failed us - in short the answer is 'no'. Are there things we would improve about our school - sure, but then who wouldn't try and improve their experience of school?

I was not 'held' back in learning to read and write. When the time came to 'learn' to read and write, I devoured the entire reading list and was of a comparable reading level (if not higher) than my friends in state schools within a year. Something else that I feel should be mentioned is the wonderful system of learning through Main Lessons. Through this method of teaching classes (4 week blocks of the same 'subject' for 3 hours every morning), I have been allowed to develop an appreciation of ancient cultures, faith systems, art history and mythology that I believe has stood me in good stead as an adult, helping me develop an interest in the wider world that I fear many of my non-Steiner friends do not have.

This said, I know that I was frustrated the higher up the school I went by the fact that I was constantly being held back by less able students AND we could have done with better equipment etc when it came to studying the sciences which is where state funding would come in handy.

Throughout my time at the Steiner school I was very lucky to have had some exceptional teachers, who were interested in us as individuals, something that I found to be, on the whole, lacking in my state school education that I undertook for my A levels.

Yes - there was a lack of appropriate sports but more through funding issues and the teaching staff than due to Steiner education which is not a rigid form of education written in a rule book somewhere, but one that continues to develop and change as should all education systems. And of course we were allowed to play football, claims about kicking the sun and primary colours made above are beyond ridiculous!

Do I think that Steiner education is suited to everyone? - of course not. And there are certainly instances where it has not worked that I have experienced first hand. However, as mentioned by others above, it is a choice and if there is a good Steiner school in your area, I would certainly recommend considering it for your children, particularly if you are interested in a more holistic approach to education than the rigidity of the state system dictates.

As for anthroposophy, I was not taught this during my entire time at the Steiner school. There were some children at my school whose parents were interested in this side of Steiner's methods, in the same way that some people are raised as Catholics, some Hindus, some atheists. I was not indoctrinated in any way by any of the teaching I received and I wish that people would comment only on those things

that they have experienced first hand and not on here-say and through ignorance. Different is not bad, different is something to understand and to make informed decisions on. It can be ignored, appraised and celebrated as appropriate by each individual and I am all for state funding for an education system that has given me this outlook on the world.



**thejmc**

02 December 2009 2:07pm

3

Hang on ! How do we square Gove's (half-hearted ?) praise of the "holistic" Steiner approach, and Freedman's perhaps more fulsome endorsement, with the Tory position taken in support of the Reform think tank's "core subject" agenda which, along with Tory pronouncements since their 2007 green paper, advocates a return to "academic", subject-driven teaching ?

Once again, Tory policy is all over the place.



**balancedlearning**

02 December 2009 6:30pm

1

By no means all Steiner schools ?are hoping the time could soon come for them to be given state funding?. While central government runs the schooling system, compromises will always have to be made in exchange for state funding. Even under the Conservatives? putatively Steiner-friendly approach, schools will have to ?reach a certain minimum benchmark in terms of exam passes? (and what will happen if they don?t?). As long as such conditions are attached to funding (conditions which could be arbitrarily escalated by any government in the future), there will always be Steiner schools whose parents and teachers choose to retain their full independence, despite suffering low salaries, fees and cramped physical resources, in the conviction that the day will eventually come, as Rudolf Steiner advocated a century ago, when schools are freed from their current domination by political and commercial interests, and become independent bodies whose central overriding focus is that of nurturing the inner resources of the child.



**MrsGrayling**

02 December 2009 7:43pm

5

balancedlearning - I'm intrigued, how would you define "the inner resources of the child" in terms of Steiner's pedagogy?

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