frontiers | Frontiers in Education

TYPE Conceptual Analysis
PUBLISHED 09 May 2024
DOI 10.3389/feduc.2024.1364978

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Liane Brouillette,
University of California, Irvine, United States

REVIEWED BY
Peter Lutzker,
Freie Hochschule Stuttgart (Waldorf Teachers College), Germany
Kimberly Telfer-Radzat,
University of California, Irvine, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Trevor Michael Mepham
✉ trevor.mepham@lineone.net

RECEIVED 03 January 2024
ACCEPTED 28 February 2024
PUBLISHED 09 May 2024

CITATION
Mepham TM (2024) Publicly funded Steiner education in England–Beautiful anomaly? Missed opportunity? Or both?
Front. Educ. 9:1364978.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1364978

COPYRIGHT
© 2024 Mepham. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Publicly funded Steiner education in England–Beautiful anomaly? Missed opportunity? Or both?

Trevor Michael Mepham*

International Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, Dornach, Switzerland

This paper reflects on an educational policy initiative taken by the New Labour Government in England in the 1990s–2000s to extend parental choice in publicly funded school education, and to widen social access to different educational approaches. As such, the policy which led to the opening of a Steiner Academy School in Herefordshire contained elements of educational diversity and inclusion, a degree of parental choice that had not been considered previously, and an extending of social access to different and distinctive educational approaches. For example, in the case of the Steiner Academy Hereford, the National Curriculum for schools in England was set aside in favour of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum framework. The paper seeks to set out the main features of the negotiation that led up to the state funding of Steiner education in England, along with an exploration of the processes, compromises, achievements and setbacks that were encountered along the way.

KEYWORDS

academy schools, state funding, international curriculum framework, Steiner, Waldorf, parental choice

Introduction

A "Public good," or a "contrivance for moulding people"?

The 1870 Education Act signalled a clear intent to provide school education on a national scale for all children in England and Wales. The provision of public funds aside, over the last 150 years, there has been an intermittent debate concerning the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the control and regulation of education by the state. In broad terms, the debate has occupied a space between the libertarian views of English philosopher and political economist, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and those advocated by the Welsh textile manufacturer, philanthropist and social reformer, Robert Owen (1771–1858).

For Owen, the provision of publicly funded education and learning opportunities to the children of the poor, uneducated masses that laboured to fuel the economic and industrial transformation of the 19th century, was the greatest imaginable public good, and the most

powerful tool for human development and social renewal. On 1st January 1816, Owen (1816) gave a speech in New Lanarkshire, in which he outlined his social vision for the year 2000:

> *"What ideas individuals may attach to the term 'Millennium', I know not: but I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any, misery and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundred-fold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment, except ignorance, to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal."*

John Stuart Mill, on the other hand, while supporting the general notion that universal education and learning are unquestionably positive developments, was much more cautious about the reach and the role of the state in such affairs. In an essay - On Liberty - written in 1859, Mill (1859) wrote:

> *"If the government would make up its mind to require for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of providing one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children, and defraying the entire school expenses of those who have no one else to pay for them."* (97)

Mill warned that in his view,

> *"A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; . . . in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body. An education established and controlled by the State should only exist, if it exist at all, as one among many competing experiments, carried on for the purpose of example and stimulus."* (97)

In one respect, the forebodings expressed by Mill encapsulate the anxieties and doubts of those in the UK who have expressed the view that, intentionally, or not, the advent of Steiner education into the national education 'system' would be an inevitable sell-out, with successive compromises and adjustments leading to the eventual hollowing-out of the educational ethos and distinctive pedagogical approaches.

This paper will examine the process whereby, in 2008, Steiner education in England took 'the King's shilling' and consider whether the spoon crafted to sup with the state was long enough for both parties to be able to enjoy the meal. The 'David and Goliath' nature of the relationship between government, with its full array of policy levers and powers, and the 'small is beautiful', holistic aspirations of an independent 'community' school will be described and analysed by reflective inquiry.

Aspects of the school's past, present and future will be delineated and weighed. Taking an 'interested party's' perspective, an evaluation of the effectiveness and 'worthwhileness' of the experiment to publicly fund Steiner Waldorf education will be attempted.

Setting the scene

In the UK, the development of Steiner's work in the field of education has a history that stretches back to the early decades of the 20th century. In Steiner (1922)[1], was invited to participate in a conference at the University of Oxford. *The Manchester Guardian* (29th August 1922) reported that Steiner's lectures had "*vividly brought home to us the human educational ideal.*" Following further lecture tours to *Yorkshire (1923)* and *Torquay (1924)*, the first Steiner school in the UK opened its doors in *London*, in January 1925.

For about 50 years the Steiner Waldorf schools' movement in the UK and Ireland grew slowly and quietly. Arguably, this initial phase can be characterised as the emergence of a small collection of idiosyncratic, "private," or fee-paying schools, catering to progressive, liberal, middle-class families, some of whom were students of Steiner's work and/or co-workers in Steiner schools and therapeutic (special) education schools, *Camphill* "villages," and biodynamic farms.

In the 1970s, in the wake of waves of protest by students and activists washing around the western world, and calls for peace and social justice ringing out, a second phase of Steiner Waldorf schools was conjured into life, sustained by meagre levels of parent funding and huge amounts of good will, enthusiasm and ingenuity. For better and for worse, these schools were often referred to as *alternative* or *progressive* schools, while critics seeking for caricature sometimes employed the term "*hippy school.*" At arms-length from the regulatory frameworks and systems of national curricula and summative testing that tended to drive the state-funded education sector, these independent, or parent-funded schools popped up in mainly rural or provincial locations. Some of the distinctive features they offered included: creativity, sustainability, experiential learning, community relationships and a non-sectarian approach to spirituality.

Meanwhile, in the background, advocates of Steiner education made occasional and faltering attempts to engage with government and a range of political actors and agencies. The objective was to seek some element of public recognition and funding, and to fulfil the aim of broadening social access to the education. This campaign and lobbying work began to pick up pace in the final years of the 20th century, both in England and, separately, in Ireland. In 1997, a "New Labour" government led by Prime Minister, Tony Blair, took office. Part of its manifesto for government included a commitment to add to the diversity of publicly funded schools in England.

In July 2004, Prime Minister Blair (2004) set out his commitment in a speech to the Fabian Society in London, stressing that education spending,

> *"will be devoted to the state system, so that there are more good schools among which all parents can choose - including academies and other new schools run by independent sponsors*

1 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/top-quotes-from-davos-on-the-future-of-education

> *in the state system on the basis of all-ability admissions and fair funding*" (7th July 2004).

A year later, in 2005 the Blair government commissioned the first comprehensive mapping of Steiner school education in England, conducted by researchers at the *University of the West of England* (Woods et al., 2005). This was a significant development on the road to recognition, since during the preceding decades, the interface between Steiner education and the world of higher education had been, and to a large extent remains, characterised by scepticism and ambivalence. In this on-off relationship of mutual doubt, the words "innovation" and "evidence" are often in play. To put it bluntly, Steiner education is sometimes portrayed as a blend of striking innovation, and outdated, homespun modes of practice. The lack of evidence tends to be held up as a significant barrier to scholarly acceptance. Charming and/or colourful anecdotes abound, while secure, gritty evidence—of success, effectiveness, relevance and worth—have been hard to pin down.

At various times over the last 30 years, occasional research papers have been published in the UK, focusing on aspects of Steiner's pedagogy. There have been a few collaborations and partnerships between Steiner educators, Steiner Waldorf schools and teacher education programmes in the higher education sector. For some 20 years, a BA degree in Steiner Education was approved and accredited by the *University of Plymouth* and an EU *Comenius* Project led to the design and approval of a *European Masters* in Steiner Education. More recently, there have a range of contacts embracing research, teaching and learning, and quality assurance with universities in *Stirling*, *Greenwich*, *Bristol*, *Canterbury*, *Plymouth*, and most recently, *Bath Spa* and *Buckingham*. The debate and sporadic exchanges continue, together with the stereotypes, and some genuine interest.

And so, with the dawn of a new century, after decades of informal contacts with a range of political parties and agencies, the stars seemed to be aligning for a breakthrough in terms of securing funds from the public purse for the provision of Steiner Waldorf education. In the early 2000s, following several years of intense negotiations at governmental level in *Ireland* and *England*, state recognition and public funding was granted to two Steiner Waldorf schools in *Ireland* and one in *England*.

In September 2008, after more than 80 years of direct parent-funding of Steiner schools in the UK, the first publicly funded Steiner school in England—the *Steiner Academy Hereford*[2] located in the Herefordshire village of *Much Dewchurch*—opened its doors. One year previously, the 1000th Steiner school in the world had opened. In addition, in an unplanned piece of synchronicity, the Irish Government decided to fund two Steiner schools in south-west Ireland in the very same year.

Possibilities and possible problems

As noted above, from the perspective of government, the opening of a Steiner Academy seemed to be a concrete attempt to include diversity—different kinds of schools—in the national education "offer" and, arguably, to "realise" the oft-quoted rhetoric of successive governments by providing more scope for "parental choice." As far as the UK Steiner schools movement was concerned, a series of opportunities and risks were presented by this venture into the unchartered waters of public regulation and accountability to government. An opportunity seemed to be presented by the prospect of widening the potential for social access to the education; an additional plus point for Steiner educators was the possibility to engage in an active discourse with colleagues in the wider educational field.

The risks were regarded by opponents and sceptics within the schools' movement as in "plain sight," visible to all who could see; namely, a watering down of distinctive "Waldorf" pedagogies and an international curriculum framework, a curtailment of freedoms in teaching and learning, and a requirement to adhere to "standard" forms of governance, leadership, and measurable learning outcomes.

Personal position

I was born in England and have always lived here. I have been involved in Steiner Waldorf education since the 1980s, as class teacher, school principal, school parent, teacher educator, education adviser and school development partner. After a period of school teaching, I worked in the Faculty of Education at the University of Plymouth for 12 years. I was appointed Principal of the *Steiner Academy Hereford* in 2007 and undertook a year's secondment from the University of Plymouth. Following a transitional period, the school opened as an Academy and I held the post for 4 years, from 2008 to 2012. During this period, 25 years after becoming a class teacher, I assumed the role of "guinea pig" and, as principal of a state-funded Academy school, I undertook a school-based, graduate teacher programme (GTP), to reach the required standards for *qualified teacher status* (QTS) in England.

The child is father of the man[3]

The *Steiner Academy Hereford* did not appear as a *tabula rasa*, newly minted for a brave new world of educational change and opportunity. The "new" school—a state-funded Academy school—brought with it a history, a legacy, and a strong and vibrant ethos in the guise of a predecessor school.

Hereford Waldorf School was part of the second phase, or wave of development of Steiner Waldorf schools mentioned earlier. The school began in 1980 with 6 children. Their classroom was a room in the home of one of the parents. Three years later, the "home-school" managed to purchase a traditional, Victorian village schoolhouse in the village of *Much Dewchurch*. The school was set down a country lane, surrounded by farmland,

2 https://www.steineracademyhereford.org.uk/

3 From the poem by William Wordsworth, *My Heart Leaps Up*, composed in 1802, published in 1807.

6 miles south of the city of Hereford Today, the village has just 700 residents, and is home to the *Steiner Academy Hereford*.[4]

By 2000, the growing school consisted of the village schoolhouse, an Elizabethan barn, a farmhouse—*Church Farm*—that adjoined the village church, and an array of "temporary" portacabins and sheds. By now, the school's roll extended from toddlers through to teenagers. The "finishing point" for the school and the stepping-off point for the students was 16 years of age. Regarding student progression, the school had negotiated an innovative, pragmatic, and effective arrangement with the local sixth form college in the city of Hereford. Prior to transition to Academy status, the predecessor school had offered students a minimal number of public exams and qualifications in the form of GCSEs[5] and OCNs.[6] Then, based on a teacher's report, a portfolio of the student's work from the previous 2 years, an interview with college tutors and the qualifications at 16+ mentioned above, a student was granted a place on a course or courses of their choosing.

For nearly 30 years, the fabric and activities of the school—the buildings, the administration and support services, the teaching and learning, the bills, and the mortgages—were funded and supported by the parent-body through a framework including regular financial contributions, non-financial, practical contributions, voluntary work, and parent-led fundraising.

There was a shared, or collaborative model of school leadership and management, via a "flat model" of colleagues working together with mandated responsibilities. The governance of the school was assumed by a leadership group consisting of teachers, supporters and parents. Since its inception, the school had had no headteacher.

As the first publicly funded Steiner school in the UK, tasked with bringing "authentic" difference into the educational system, and charged with demonstrating public accountability and educational quality, the school found itself, from day one, in the middle of both a building project and an innovation project. Offering a different curriculum, working with a different pedagogy, and articulating a distinctive ethos,[7] the Steiner Academy had to work out how to find a place within the funded system of schools in England, and to have that place publicly recognised–its work validated as providing a genuine, positive effective difference—as a school that works well for children from all social backgrounds and abilities.

Preparing the policy groundwork

The policy foundations for *Hereford Waldorf School's* journey to *Steiner Academy Hereford* can be traced back to 1996. In December of that year, sentiments expressed by the then Leader of the Opposition, Blair (1996), in his speech at Ruskin College Oxford, appeared to nod in the direction of a broader, richer, more open concept of teaching and learning.

> "*Education is about more than exams. We are right to be concerned about how our children seem to be falling behind. But we are also right to insist that education is about something more. Ruskin College reminds us that education is about opening minds not just to knowledge, but to insight, beauty, inspiration*" (Blair, 1996, 16th December 1996).

On coming to office a few months later, the government flagged up its intentions for education policy in a White Paper: *Excellence in Schools* (1997).

> *"If we are to prepare successfully for the twenty-first century we will have to do more than just improve literacy and numeracy skills. We need a broad, flexible and motivating education that recognises the different talents of all children."*

Further support for the call for breadth, flexibility and a commitment to motivate children and young people came in 2001, with the publication of a report–*All Our Futures*—by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education [NACCCE] (2001). The report argued that the priorities and pressures in education acted to inhibit the creative abilities of young people and their teachers. Particular concern was expressed about the decline of the arts and humanities in the programme for learning. At the same time, anxiety was expressed that science education was losing its vitality because of these pressures. The report authors stressed that assessment and inspection must support not inhibit creative and cultural education:

> *"raising standards should not mean standardisation, or the objectives of creative and cultural education will be frustrated"* (11).

Against this background, what, in practical terms, did "*a broad, flexible and motivating education"* mean? And what might a publicly funded Steiner school bring to the table? In summary, several elements can be pinpointed:

- There were no requirements to adhere to national or county admission arrangements.
- The programme of teaching and learning was based on the international Steiner Waldorf curriculum framework.
- The "early years phase" continued through to rising 7, from age 3+ (Parker-Rees, 2011).
- As an all-through school, from 3+ to 16+, a child could spend 12 or 13 years of their lives in continuous education on one site. The school had one site, embracing early years, primary-middle and secondary school phases. The model of teaching and learning provided for 2 or 3 years in the nursery and kindergarten, followed by an 8-year period in which a single class teacher might remain with a group of children from 6+ to 14+., ending with a 2-year "upper school"

4 https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/westmidlands/admin/county_of_herefordshire/E04000838__much_dewchurch/

5 OCN—*Open College Network*—an organisation developed to recognise informal student learning.

6 GCSE - the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* (GCSE) qualification at end of year 10 / age 16+.

7 "We offer an education that enables children to experience childhood fully while enabling them to become responsible, free individuals who can think clearly and considerately, observe perceptively and act constructively for the good of the world." https://www.steineracademyhereford.org.uk/ (accessed September 25, 2023).

phase of specialist teaching across a range of multidisciplinary themes.

- Modern foreign languages—German and Spanish—were part of the learning programme from rising 7, along with handwork, eurythmy and a series of outdoor land-based crafts.
- There was no national testing—standardised assessment tests (SATs)—at age 11. A slim, non-standard package of qualifications and assessments was offered at 16+, as an endpoint to the school, and as part of the admissions process to the local sixth form college.
- The school was run collectively by a group of colleagues with a specialist training in Steiner's educational ideas and approaches, the majority of whom were "unqualified" in the eyes of the state, since they lacked the "mainstream" professional qualification which conferred *qualified teacher status* (QTS).

Principles, practices, and hints of resonance

In this section, an attempt will be made to offer a soupçon of the principles underlying Steiner's approach to teaching and learning, some of the practices that arise out of these principles, and thirdly, to consider some educational voices from the last 40 years or so, to gauge whether some implicit dialog or convergence can be detected.

Over the last 100 years various iterations of Steiner's educational insights and indications have been articulated, as the movement has grown and spread to different parts of the world.[8] From the very outset, Steiner offered a vision that was disarmingly clear, and tantalisingly difficult to grasp. In the opening lecture of an intense 2-week short course of teacher development, just days before the first school opened in Stuttgart, Steiner (1996b), stated that, *"The task of education understood in a spiritual sense is to bring the soul-spirit into harmony with the temporal body"* (39).

The idea that the central defining purpose of education, of teaching and learning, is to foster and enable the healthy growth, development and learning of the human being, who lives both in a general stream of age-related development, and an individual stream of development that is, itself, related to a complex tapestry of biological, cultural, geographical and spiritual realities, all mediated by the unique character, anima or soul of the individual, constitutes a rich landscape and field of possibility, as well as being a radical concept of common sense and shared humanity.

In an opening address to children, teachers and parents, on the 7th of September 1919, Steiner (1996a), attempted to sum up, his vision for the education in the school. In an aphoristic turn of phrase, he welcomed the teachers and families and homed in on the essential task:

> *"Science that comes alive! Art that comes alive! Religion that comes alive! In the end, that is what education is"* (16).

In more prosaic, pedagogical-curricular terms, the educational practice embraces an idea of integrated education in which the core skills of oracy, numeracy and literacy are woven together with a study of science, and an immersion in the arts. Alongside the core skills and academic disciplines, experiential learning–in the form of handwork and land-crafts–and an exploration–through narrative, biography and history–of the moral-ethical ideas, myths and truths of diverse cultures and religions, form the cornerstones of the international curriculum framework.

Curriculum and pedagogy are predicated on the notion that lesson material and educational method must be in harmony with the generic developmental stage of the class of children and the development and progress of the individual children in the class. In the early years, especially in the 4–6 years period, the educational focus is on physical growth and movement, imaginative, child-generated play, imitation and rhythmical activities. Formal learning and attention to aesthetic and affective faculties are prominent in the "heart of childhood" from 7 to 12, while an increasing emphasis on analytical, rational, cognitive capabilities provides the educational signature of the older classes (Steiner, 1972, 1988).

The teaching of foreign languages from the age of 7 is fostered; "eurythmy"–a form of artistic movement blended with music and speech is practised; play, drama, music and art are recognised as vital and rewarding channels for learning and progression. The assessment approaches focus on a range of continuous and contextualised assessments that reflect the range of abilities in the classroom and the scope and detail of the programme of teaching and learning.

The insights and principles on which Steiner Waldorf education is founded embrace a range of methods and approaches that preview and share ideas and concepts that have emerged more clearly over the last 100 years—from Dewey's ideas on "progressivism" in school education (Dewey, 1938), to Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1999), Eisner's work on cognitive pluralism (Eisner, 1994), the educational priorities outlined by the Delors Commission (Delors, 1996), and the value-oriented concept of education outlined in the Kroneberg Declaration (German Commission for UNESCO, 2007).

In 1996, the Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, "*Learning: The Treasure Within*" (Delors, 1996) argued for an integrated vision for education and learning worldwide, founded on the paradigms of lifelong learning and the four pillars of learning—learning how to know, to do, to be, and how to live together.

Ten years later, at the invitation of UNESCO, a panel of experts issued the *Kronberg Declaration on the Future of Knowledge Acquisition and Sharing*. The panel reports that in an era of digitalised learning and web-based knowledge and information,

> *"knowledge acquisition and sharing institutions will have to focus more closely on the development of social and emotional*

8 https://www.waldorf-international.org/en/key-characteristics-of-waldorf-education/ https://ecswe.eu/waldorf-steiner-education-in-europe-2/

> *abilities and skills, and to come to a wider, value-based concept of education;"*

> *"The importance of acquiring factual knowledge will decrease, whereas the ability to find one's way in complex systems and to find, judge, organize and creatively use relevant information, as well as the capability to learn, will become crucially important";*

The following decade, at the *World Economic Forum* in September 2018, Ma (2018), founding CEO of *Alibaba*—the global e-commerce company—spoke of the need for an educational reboot.

> *"Education is a big challenge now. If we do not change the way we teach 30 years later, we will be in trouble. Because the way we teach, the things we teach our kids for the past 200 years have been knowledge-based. We cannot teach our kids to compete with the machines - they are smarter. So, what can we teach kids to prepare for tomorrow's world? Values, believing, independent thinking, caring for others. These are the soft parts. Knowledge will not teach you that. That's why I think we should teach our kids sports, music, painting and art. To make sure that humans should be different, everything we teach should be different from machines. If the machine can do better, you have to think about it. In this way, 30 years later, kids will have a chance."*[9]

At the same event, Director of the London School of Economics, Minouche Shafik, said,

> *"Anything that is routine or repetitive will be automated."* She stressed importance of "*the soft skills, creative skills. Research skills, the ability to find information, synthesise it, make something of it*" (ibid).

Then in March WBGU (2019), the German Advisory Council on Global Change published a report entitled: *Toward our Common Digital Future*, focusing on the concept of a "*digitalised sustainability society.*" The report identifies two of the most important developments of the recent modern age; firstly, a growing threat to humanity's natural life-support systems and secondly, dramatic and far-reaching advances in the field of information and communication technology (ICT).

These developments present two crucial challenges, which the report pinpoints as: "sustaining the natural life-support systems" and adapting to the "digital revolution." The health of the natural environment will depend greatly on success of the digital revolution, and yet, there is a risk that digitalisation will act like a "fire accelerant", further stretching and weakening the biosphere. The report demands that these challenges "*are finally studied holistically,*" arguing that the "*old way of thinking*" focusing on "*specialisation, separation and linearization*" has become an unhelpful dogma.

9 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/top-quotes-from-davos-on-the-future-of-education

Compromises—New promises?

The reality of compromise in a project such as the formation of the *Steiner Academy Hereford* is undeniable. Yet, the notion of compromise is invariably contested. The concept–*"com-promis"*—is a confluence of two Latin words meaning, *to promise together*. One way of looking at compromise is to see it as a movement away from ideals, traditions and principles. But compromise can also be interpreted as the seedbed from which new and unknown change may grow. Rather than going my way or your way, in some senses compromise breaks new ground and works out of the future, tracing a route which may lead to a destination which might not have been intended, yet is resonant of its time and place. Associations with terms such as watering down or selling out are some ways distant from what is arguably an ideal notion of forging a new agreement or compact with others.

Steiner (1996b, 29), referred to compromise as being a necessary stage *en route* to the fulfilment of an ideal. Presumably, he was referring to compromise as a shared commitment to something new—*promise together*—rather than an imperfect or thwarted attempt to reach one's stated goal.

Then

In August 1919, just before the *Waldorf* School opened in Stuttgart, Steiner (1996b) spoke directly to the teachers about the need to make compromises:

> *"it is necessary that we make compromises, because we are not yet so far developed that we can accomplish a truly free deed... On the one hand we must know what our ideals are, and, on the other hand, we must have the flexibility enough to conform to what lies far from our ideals. It will be difficult to for each of you to find how to bring these two forces into harmony"* (29–30).

Certainly, at the outset, a mixture of creativity, chaos and compromise characterised the opening of the Waldorf school. The school opened over a week late, the timetable was in draft format right up to the last minute, and the children were taught in two shifts, since there were not enough classrooms for the numbers enrolled, while the desks arrived in dribs and drabs, leaving the pupils to sit on the chairs from the former restaurant. while writing by leaning on their knees.

The school had to obtain permission to open, and three compromises were struck with the local government authorities enabling the school to open its doors. Firstly, the school agreed to be inspected regularly, including a pre-opening registration visit. Initially, the teachers had to be authorised by the regional ministry of education and subsequently, were required to have a state teacher's certificate. The third compromise was in the realm of teaching and learning. A degree of freedom and autonomy in the curriculum on offer was granted, and in return, it was agreed that the school would undertake to ensure that there would be academic parity with state schools in the region at the ages 9, 12, and 14.

Three years later, in 1921, Steiner (2003) returned to the theme of compromise. In relation to how the children should be taught

and cared for, Steiner urged the teachers to bring a lively and contemporary approach to the lessons and the pupils:

> *"Pupils must never become estranged from contemporary life... right from the start the most varied compromises have to be made."*

And now

The first Waldorf school opened with a package of three fundamental compromises, or new promises, as mentioned above. Fast-forward to 2008, and the agreement, or deal between the New Labour Government and the UK national movement of schools—the *Steiner Waldorf Schools' Fellowship*[10] consisted of a series of elements—a melange of statutory requirements, expectations and opportunities—gathered together in a Funding Agreement. Some of these elements are outlined and discussed below.

The deal, the compromises, and the new agreements

The *Steiner Academy Hereford* was and continues to be impacted in many areas with the arrival of state funding. In brief, the following features are unambiguously related to state-funding:

- a capital building programme of approximately £7 million for refurbishment and new build,
- guaranteed annual "recurring" funding,[11]
- an offer of Steiner education that families did not have to pay for, beyond the tax-code,
- the broadening of social access to families previously unable to afford to send the children to a parent-funded school,
- a full school with waiting lists,
- increased funding per pupil,
- the provision of free school meals (FSM) for children from eligible families,[12]
- increased salaries for teachers,
- a pupil admissions policy containing a catchment area, and no selection, with children who are, or have been in public care or adopted coming at the top of the oversubscription criteria for admission,
- as an Academy school, the disapplication of the National Curriculum for England[13] and the acceptance, in its place, of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum framework and approaches to teaching and learning,
- an understanding that in Steiner Waldorf education, the early years phase continues until rising 7, and the beginning of formal education in Class 1 (Year 2), at rising 8,
- the offer of specialist subjects on the timetable, including, foreign languages from age 7, eurythmy in the kindergarten, lower and middle school, handwork in lower and middle school, and woodwork and land-crafts in the middle school and upper school,
- the placing of information technology (IT) in the programme of teaching and learning from Class 7 onward, via programmes offered by *The Learning Machine*, providing qualifications in essential digital skills based on the INGOT assessment mode,
- additional funding for those pupils and students who have special, or additional educational needs and disabilities (SEND).[14]

Standards—Upholding uniformity, or embracing quality?

One of the knottier, or one could say, more interesting elements of the deal, which may not have been that apparent at the time, lies in the differing perspectives that can be held regarding educational standards. For the last 25 years, with the advent of the PISA (Program for International Student Achievement) testing programme,[15] what is sometimes called the "standards movement" has set the agenda for a Global Education Reform Movement—GERM (Robinson, 2015, 6). Successive governments in the UK have been enthusiasts and proponents of the drive to push up educational standards as a fundamental plank of education policy.

Before the first school opened, on 20th August 2019, Steiner (1996b) had offered a blunt and negative assessment of the standards that prevailed in school education at the time:

> *"The state imposes terrible learning goals and terrible standards, the worst imaginable, but people will imagine them to be the best. Today's policies and political activity treat people like pawns. More than ever before, attempts will be made to use people like cogs in a wheel. People will be handled like puppets on a string, and everyone will think that this reflects the greatest progress imaginable"* (29–30).

10 https://waldorfeducation.uk/

11 Recurring funding: amounts for 2010/11: *General Annual Grant* - Total receivable = £1,397,384, pupils on roll (Jan 2010) = 311, average amount per pupil = £4,493 (Includes reference to pupil numbers, site specific issues, pupil attainment and free school meals, Special Needs Grant (Bands 3 and 4) = £18,000

12 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools-and-local-authorities

13 See, for example, the speech given in the House of Lords by Lord Storey, on 12th September 2016: "Academies are not obliged to follow the national curriculum and are not accountable to their local community but directly to the Minister's department via eight regional commissioners. They are not obliged to include parents or teachers as governors, can set their own salary scales and terms and conditions for staff and can employ unqualified teachers." https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2016-09-12/debates/5967E6A5-E1FD-4DEE-8487-A260DE6B9B36/TeachersAcademiesAndFreeSchools (accessed November 13, 2023).

14 https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs

15 "Since 2000, PISA has involved more than 90 countries and economies and around 3, 000, 000 students worldwide." https://www.oecd.org/pisa/ (accessed September 12, 2023).

An echo of these forebodings from 100 years ago are echoed, in part, by Robinson (2015):

> *"Typically, the standards movement is focused on curriculum and assessment. Teaching is seen as a way of delivering the standards"* (100).

> *"Too often the standards movement casts teachers in the role of service workers, whose job is to 'deliver' standards"* (101).

More recently, the English schools minister, Nick Gibb, education minister in a series of Conservative administrations nailed his and the government's colours to the mast of knowledge-delivery and measurable learning outcomes, focused on the functional skills of literacy and numeracy, and extending into what is described as a knowledge-rich curriculum. In July 2021, in an address to the Social Market Foundation, during a panel event on raising school standards, Gibb[16] suggested that,

> *"In recent years, many academics in university schools of education, leaders of tech businesses and politicians of all stripes have argued that, with the world's information at our fingertips, the focus of school should be less about teaching maths formulae or historical dates.*

> *Instead, they suggest schools should focus on teaching pupils so called '21st century skills', such as how to be more creative, to work in teams and to be problem-solvers.*

> *This notion of 'generic skills' is one of the most damaging myths in education today."*

From the perspective of a Steiner Waldorf educator, the PISA-informed debate on standards often seems to be overtly one-sided, with much of the attention given to attainment benchmarks, numeric data scores and the quantification of learning. In such a scenario, there is scant remaining space for consideration of standards of quality. And yet, in many important activities and life experiences, it is qualitative standards, such as effort and engagement, diligence and discovery that are potent, transformative and meaningful, if more difficult to quantify and measure.

Beautiful anomaly and missed opportunity

In the dictionaries, the word "anomaly" is granted a degree of potency and paradox. Whether one opts for, "*a person or thing that is different from what is usual, or not in agreement with something else and therefore not satisfactory,*"[17] or perhaps, "*something different, abnormal, peculiar, or not easily classified,*"[18] the "outlier," or non-standard nature of Steiner Waldorf education in the state-funded system is clear to see.

The advent of publicly funded Steiner Waldorf education in England served to stir the waters in ways that were, and continue to be regarded as positive by some, and controversial by others. In a certain sense, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

However, underneath the pros and cons, depending on your standpoint, a deeper and recurring question seems to lurk; namely, what is education for? Over the centuries, education has often been a contested subject. While learning–gaining experience and knowledge; developing understanding, becoming proficient, capable and learned—tends to be regarded as an intrinsically good thing, the means or pathways to learning can be hotly disputed.

Is education a public good, for each member of humankind, as proclaimed by Owen (1816)? Or is it more like a tool of the state, as argued by Mill (1859). Among other purposes ascribed to education is its value to society as a cultural activity, to its economic potential as a commercial product in an international marketplace.

It seems that the ongoing tension between a systematised, summative, techno-academic approach to childhood and learning, and an approach that places the child and the child's development at the very root and core of the educational process is not a circle that can be easily squared. In the former, measurable outcomes and evidence that can be graded are fundaments, while in the latter, human experience and human interchange are regarded as fundamental and essential, even when the outcomes elude numeric scores, and are often intangible, or "in process."

Critics of the standards agenda and the "global education reform movement" (GERM)[19] argue that a cocktail of acceleration, earliness, acceleration and simplistic, regurgitative cognitive learning sucks pretty much all the oxygen out of the classroom, or setting; where, like a dried- up wadi, the zest of learning has evaporated, and the water is shallow and toxic. Biesta (Evers and Kneybar, 2016) argues that the existing culture of summative testing and the measuring of learning and progress goes right against the grain of education, as a deep, nourishing and potent and enquiring process of discovery and learning.

Many of the distinctive approaches espoused in Waldorf education stand as a question-mark, if not a direct challenge to what are, arguably, the Panglossian-like convictions of policymakers. Ministers and officials seem convinced by the ideas and principles

16 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-importance-of-a-knowledge-rich-curriculum (accessed September 26, 2023).

17 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anomaly (accessed September 29, 23).

18 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anomaly (accessed September 12, 2023).

19 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2019.1532718#:~:text=Sahlberg%20has%20identified%20the%20principal,features%20of%20the%20new%20orthodoxy (accessed January 16, 2024).

of the standards agenda, and adamant concerning the effectiveness of a standards agenda that focuses relentlessly on the measurement of quantifiable standards. These policy objectives stand in jarring contrast to notion that the quality and vitality of children's learning and educational experiences are transformational. Added to this mix is the insight that the relationships between learners, and teachers and learners, are fundamental. A third core tenet is the understanding that the connections, associations and coherence within and between the materials and contents, shared in a developmentally resonant manner, is a pivotal factor in a student's educational achievement and progress.

In reality, the picture of learning, and the disposition to learn, is much more subtle and layered than a singular focus on end-point summative testing would seek to prove. In Finland[20] (Institute of Education and UCL, 2022), there is something of a resistance to the GERM agenda. A consistently top performer in international education league tables, a high level of trust is accorded to teachers in Finnish schools, along with a healthy regard for the processes of democratic accountability. In Hessen, in Germany, teachers are trusted and respected to such a degree that they both compile and mark exam assignments. As one study (Nolan, 1995), put it: "*trust in and respect for teachers as professionals is common in countries whose students are noted for excellence.*"

Meanwhile, in the UK, the 2020 annual report from the charity *Good Childhood* examined data from 24 European countries and reported that children aged 15 in the UK had the greatest fear of failure, and the lowest overall life satisfaction. And in the part of the UK known as England, it has been recognised for some time (Alexander et al., 2010) that, as *The Times* Newspaper (8th February 2008), reported, "*English children are tested longer, harder and younger than anywhere else in the world.*" This was the conclusion of a study comparing standards in 22 countries around the world. This body of evidence does serve to raise doubts over the one-track learning journey to a single destination, as suggested by the PISA-GERM programme.

Woven through Steiner's educational approach, on the other hand, is an underlying sense that the human being participates in a life-long quest to behold the world holistically. Learners are encouraged to analyse what is discovered and experienced with interest and warmth. Following the careful noticing, experiencing, and picturing of a world that is imbued with inner coherence that takes place in childhood, the educational focus for the young person turns to counteracting the many tendencies for the world to fragment, by creating a creative and meaningful synthesis or re-integration of the many wonderful threads.

The notion or working assumption that the human being is an "open system"—permanently unfinished—is central; a living learning being wrapped in a double vortex of generic, age-related development and unique individual growth and change. These ideas have much in common with the "*Fit Principle*" proposed by Largo (2020): (xxviii), in which he lays out what he calls an understanding that, *"Every human, with their individual needs and talents, strives to live in harmony with their environment."* And when children, young people and adults are supported in doing so, they can live a good life.

A total of 15 years after it opened, the Steiner Academy Hereford continues to be the one and only in England, and the UK as a whole. Three Steiner Free Schools opened in a brief flurry in 2012, 2013 and 2014. Within 7 years, they had closed, having fallen foul of the school regulator's judgements, and having been found wanting in areas of leadership, despite having high levels of parent approval and full classes. As for the little school set down a country lane in the Herefordshire village of Much Dewchurch, in the summer of 2023, it was judged to be "outstanding" in three areas of inspection and good overall.[21] In short, the "beautiful anomaly" is alive and well, although the opportunities beyond Much Dewchurch have been curtailed, and arguably, for the time being, somewhat squandered.

Author contributions

TM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

20 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/events/2022/may/finlands-education-system-and-its-continued-resistance-global-education-reform-movement-germ

21 https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50229091 (accessed November 16, 23).

References

Alexander, R., Armstrong, M., Flutter, J., Hargreaves, L., Harrison, D., Harlen, W., et al. (2010). *Children, their world, their education – final report and recommendations of the Cambridge primary review*. London: Routledge.

Blair, T. (1996). *The agenda for a generation*. Oxford: Ruskin College Oxford.

Blair, T. (2004). *Speech given to the Fabian society, London*. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/jul/07/schools.uk3 (accessed September 12, 2023).

Delors, J. (1996). *Learning: The treasure within; Report to UNESCO of the international commission on education for the 21st century*. Paris: UNESCO.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Eisner, E. (1994). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs*. New York, NY: Macmillan College Publishing.

Evers, J., and Kneybar, R (2016). *Flip the system – changing education from the ground up*. London: Routledge.

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: A theory of multiple intelligences*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Gardner, H. (1999). *Intelligence reframed: Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

German Commission for UNESCO (2007). *UNESCO high level group of visionaries on knowledge acquisition and sharing, Kronberg, Germany*. Bonn: German Commission for UNESCO.

Largo, R. (2020). *The right life*. London: Penguin Books.

Ma, J. (2018). Available online at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/top-quotes-from-davos-on-the-future-of-education

Mill, J. S. (1859). *On liberty*. Available online at: https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/mill/liberty.pdf (accessed January 16, 2024).

National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education [NACCCE] (2001). *All our futures: Creativity, culture & education*. Nottingham: DfEE Publications.

Nolan, K. (1995). *Where in the world are world-class standards?* Available online at: https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/where-in-the-world-are-world-class-standards (accessed January 17, 2024).

Owen, R. (1816). *An address to the inhabitants of new Lanark*. Available online at: https://infed.org/mobi/an-address-to-the-inhabitants-of-new-lanark/ (accessed November 12, 2023).

Parker-Rees, R. (2011). *Meeting the child in Steiner kindergartens*. London: Routledge.

Robinson, K. (2015). *Creative schools*. London: Penguin Books.

Steiner, R. (1972). *A modern art of education*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press.

Steiner, R. (1988). *The kingdom of childhood*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press.

Steiner, R. (1996b). *The foundations of human experience*. New York, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

Steiner, R. (1996a). *Rudolf Steiner in the Waldorf school*. New York, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

Steiner, R. (2003). *Soul economy body: Soul and spirit in Waldorf education*. New York, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

WBGU (2019). *Towards our common digital future*. Available online at: https://www.wbgu.de/en/publications/publication/towards-our-common-digital-future (accessed September 28, 2023).

Woods, P., Ashley, M., and Woods, G. (2005). *Steiner schools in England, research report RR645*. Bristol: University of the West of England.