

STEINER WALDORF EDUCATION, PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

*Can the Steiner Waldorf schools
movement break out of its niche by
engaging with its critics?*

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Part One: Introduction

I. **B**ACKGROUND

I discovered early on in my research into Steiner Waldorf education that there was an abundance of critical material posted about the movement online. A simple Google search on ‘Steiner education’ brings up, on the first page, a link to David Colquhoun’s Improbable Science blog, bearing the title: “The true nature of Steiner (Waldorf) education: Mystical barmpttery at taxpayers’ expense” (Anon, 2010) - and this is just part one of a three-part series on the subject. A search for ‘Steiner critics’ brings up plenty more results of an equally scathing nature. What impact would this have on curious parents looking into this form of education for the first time, I wondered? Could there really be any substance behind the barrage of critical views?

Whilst in the early stages of my degree in Steiner education, I put the criticisms that I had read on the backburner. I knew I would look into it more deeply when the right time came; I couldn’t ignore the phenomenon, as a critical thinker unafraid to consider diverse and controversial opinions. An opportunity arose in March 2011 when I was sent a link to a blog post which featured a tough, uncompromising response to an article in the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship newsletter that had angered critics by, amongst other things, painting critical views as “attacks” on Steiner education. The blog post intrigued me, because, whilst I could understand the spirit in which the newsletter had been written, its online rebuttal was not just a vitriolic retaliation – it was thoughtful, well-reasoned and for the most part, fair. The writer, Zooey a.k.a. dissatisfied ex-Waldorf pupil Alicia Hamberg, posed a challenge:

“How about trying to understand what critics are saying? How about taking it seriously? How about stopping the ‘I’ll sue you if you do what I don’t like’-silliness?”

(Hamberg, 2011)

She highlighted the critics' perception of the Waldorf movement: that it dismisses dissent in the manner of a cult and promotes unquestioning belief amongst its adherents. I was certain that Waldorf proponents could do better than that – that, rather than ignoring or brushing off criticism (which to critics and probably others too looks like an inability to rebut claims), engaging directly with critics and sceptics would be more fruitful, or at the very least show that we value, rather than reject, differing opinions. With both sides presumably feeling strongly about providing good education, I thought some common ground could be found. Subsequently I entered into a brief discussion with some of the blog critics which I ultimately found to be enlightening and frustrating in equal measure: enlightening because in many ways our ideals were not so dissimilar, and frustrating because there was nevertheless a seemingly unbridgeable gap between my outlook and theirs.

Meanwhile, I looked at some of the counter-criticisms on pro-Waldorf websites, but they seemed to exist in a bubble, detached from the ongoing debates on blogs and forums, and ultimately failed to provide the answers I was looking for. Once again I felt that people deserved more engagement and real answers – not only for the sake of appeasing critics, but also to inform curious researchers who had not yet made their minds up for or against Steiner education. There was also another factor on the horizon which made the need to address criticism more pressing than ever: state funding of Steiner 'free' schools in the UK. One online critic expressed it thus:

“What right do you have, Steiner movement, not to be analysed? Not to face questions about your pedagogy, the basis of your pedagogy, the books your teachers read, the Ofsted reports on your schools? What gives you the right to secure millions, especially at a time of such austerity, without facing the same scrutiny as any other education system?”

(ibid.)

I felt, and still feel, that these are absolutely reasonable questions – even though I happen to think that the state system of education is as much in need of scrutiny (and overhaul) as the Steiner one. But these questions made me wonder: as Waldorf schools gain increasing attention as a result of free school applications (one of which, the Steiner Academy Frome, has been successful in securing its share of

taxpayers' money), do proponents have the will or the capacity to respond in an open and balanced way to critical views? Thus far, things seemed quiet on that front. Might I be able to kick-start the process – or at the very least, find answers to satisfy my own quest for truth?

These are some of the questions that led me to embark on this dissertation project. I came up with a title that is deliberately provocative, and alludes to the prospect of state funding, which to my mind is the only means by which the movement can 'break out of its niche' and become accessible to a wider demographic than has been possible (at least in the UK) up until now. I chose this title because I also believe Waldorf education has much to offer the world beyond the alternative community that it currently primarily appeals to.

Being somewhat familiar with critical views already, I had already identified two 'strands': criticisms that implicate practice (what actually happens in schools), and those that implicate the schools' underlying philosophy, that is, anthroposophy. Naturally, as the philosophy is supposed to inform the practice, these frequently overlap. For my project, I decided to examine some of the most common criticisms, as well as taking people's negative experiences of schools into consideration, with a view to establishing:

- a) To what extent the criticism is justified based on my experience and reasoning;
- b) How Waldorf proponents respond/have responded to the criticism;
- c) Whether the criticism applies to individual, isolated schools, or extends to the Waldorf movement as a whole.

I also wanted to probe people on both sides of the debate to find out individuals' attitudes and get a wider perspective of the phenomenon. Are those working within the Waldorf movement open to debate and dissent? How often are they faced with criticism in the real world? And on the critics' side – what is their background, how did they come to form their negative opinions? What do they hope to achieve from deconstructing Waldorf on the internet? Do they have an end goal at all?



II. METHODOLOGY

With all this in mind, I designed a challenging questionnaire for Waldorf proponents (see Appendix I), and distributed this, primarily via email, to schools, my fellow course members, and anyone I knew who was sufficiently informed to be able to respond to the questions. I came up with an equally challenging set of questions for Waldorf critics (see Appendix II), which I submitted to the most prominent online critics. I came across one or two people who fit into neither category; some interesting dialogue arose out of those interactions.

My methodology was not without its problems. One was the issue of privacy and trust, on both sides. Given the contentious, even sensitive nature of the subject, how could either side – the Waldorf world or its critics – trust me not to use anything they said against them? On several occasions I felt that pro-Steiner people were suspicious of me because they thought I was undermining them or siding with critics, whilst critics were suspicious of me because I am enrolled on a Steiner Education degree, so naturally I must have an agenda to prove them wrong. I also had difficulties obtaining replies from the people whose views I really wanted to hear – teachers and parents – perhaps because my emails landed in secretaries' inboxes and never made it any further, or perhaps because my questionnaire would have been too time-consuming for busy people, being, as someone noted, worthy of 'essay-length' responses. Nevertheless, I declined to change the format of the questionnaire or to shorten it in any way, as I wanted to treat the subject with the depth I felt it deserves.

My thoroughness and ambition for this project created another problem, however: I realised in the course of writing that my original intentions, to examine specific criticisms in-depth as well as looking at individuals' attitudes, backgrounds, expectations, as well as tangential views concerning the role of anthroposophy and the prospect of state funding, were actually far too large in scope for the limitations of a 10,000-word dissertation. I am thus disappointed not to be able to use all of the material I was planning to refer to, in questionnaire/critics' responses and other sources, even though some of what I have had to omit was enlightening and thought-provoking.

III. **W**ALDORF CRITICS – AN ONLINE PHENOMENON

Although one doesn't have to look hard to stumble upon critical views of Waldorf education online, the number of websites dedicated to the cause is actually small; nevertheless, the ones that do exist tend to be very active, some with daily or near-daily updates. The most prominent and well-known is People for Legal and Nonsectarian Schools (PLANS, Inc., 2011), a US-based organisation founded in 1995 that aims to educate the public about what they see as the true (that is, occult or religious) nature of Steiner education, and campaigns against government funding of Steiner schools on the grounds that they violate the constitutional separation of church and state. There is a Yahoo! Waldorf Critics list run by Dan Dugan, the founder of PLANS, which also serves as a message board and is open to anyone (Dugan, 2007). Many dissatisfied ex-Waldorf parents turn to forums or pre-existing sites to express their concerns, but a few have also set up their own websites or blogs detailing their stories (Karaiskos, 2009). Then there are a couple of critical websites by former Waldorf pupils, notably Waldorf Watch (Rawlings, 2012) and the aforementioned blog, The Ethereal Kiosk (Hamberg, 2008). One may also stumble upon the essays of historian Peter Staudenmaier (Staudenmaier, 2009), who postulates strong connections between anthroposophy and German nationalism.

Besides the established websites and blogs, critical articles and forum threads have become more frequent in recent years. I have already mentioned the guest-written series of posts on David Colquhoun's blog (Anon, 2010); more recently an article appeared on Quackometer, entitled "Frome Steiner Academy: Absurd Educational Quackery" (Lewis, 2012). Positive articles written about Steiner education, on the Guardian website for example (Finn, 2009), often attract backlash from critics in the comments section.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep the phenomenon in perspective; in an email correspondence with me, Daniel Hindes, author of counter-critical website *Defending Steiner* (Hindes, 2007), pointed out that:

"With the internet, everyone is a publisher, and in most forums there is no fact-checking. The anti-Waldorf movement would make an interesting study

in Discourse Analysis, studying the mechanisms whereby less than ten people can appear to be a 50/50 balance to 1000+ schools employing 60,000+ teachers and educating over a million students, worldwide.”

Hindes’s assertion that the core group of Waldorf critics is comprised of fewer than ten people is debatable, and in my view, unfairly dismissive of the legitimate concerns of many former pupils and parents who had negative experiences. Yet it is true that one sees many of the same names expressing anti-Waldorf views in various forums across the internet. Even so, numbers are not as important as the substance of the claims; if it were just one person behind the anti-Steiner movement, their concerns would still warrant consideration.

In addition to Hindes’s website in defence of Steiner’s teachings, there exist a few other sites with a specific mission to counter criticism of Waldorf education. These include Waldorf Answers (Mays, 2011) and Americans for Waldorf Education (Mays, 2005), which appear to be run by the same group of people, and the homepage of “Uncle Taz” (Straume, 2011). Stephen Sagarin has written thoughtful responses to critics’ accusations on his blog, What Is Education? (Sagarin, 2008). The self-styled “Waldorf Education Super-Site” OpenWaldorf, which purports to be an unbiased source of information for parents, provides space for critical views as well as refutations (Holland, 2003). Besides these sites, the Swedish Waldorf Schools Federation has allegedly engaged in the controversial strategy of employing an individual to monitor (some say silence) online criticism of Steiner education (Hamberg, 2010).



IV. **D**IALOGUE WITH CRITICS

Around the same time that I distributed my questionnaire amongst Waldorf proponents, I also submitted some questions to Waldorf critics via blogs and Dan Dugan's Yahoo Group. Alicia Hamberg wrote a blog post about my dissertation which attracted attention from readers, mostly of a sceptical or even suspicious nature, but a few people showed receptivity to my project and responded to my questions (Hamberg, 2012). In hindsight, some of my questions turned out to be unnecessary as the answers that I was seeking were mostly already available online, on critics' blogs and websites. Nevertheless, I did get some interesting and original responses, especially regarding critics' perspectives on the future of Steiner education, which are featured in the final part of my dissertation.



Having briefly looked at the online criticism as a phenomenon, in the next section I will address the actual content of the criticism, interspersed with quotes drawn from questionnaire responses where these are insightful or provide interesting points for discussion. The reader is advised that although I have divided my analysis into sub-headings for the sake of organisation, distinctions are not always clear-cut, and there is often an overlap between criticisms.

In the final part of the dissertation I will examine the attitudes of Waldorf proponents and reflect on what Waldorf critics had to say to me, and I will also consider the future of Steiner education, especially in the light of state funding.

Please note that I do not claim to have all the answers or to settle matters once and for all. It is likely that many people on both sides of the debate will take issue with both my approach and my conclusions. There is also a lot of material to cover in a limited number of words. Therefore, this dissertation is a tentative beginning of a discussion, it is not in any way supposed to be the 'final word'.

Part Two: Addressing the Criticism

I. **ANTHROPOSOPHY IN WALDORF EDUCATION**

Many of the concerns about Waldorf education implicate its underlying philosophy. Literally meaning ‘wisdom of man’, Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, or ‘spiritual science’ as he often referred to it, draws heavily on theosophical teachings to build a rich and complex picture of human evolution through successive stages – predating earthly humanity as we know it today, and culminating in the “Vulcan” period of pure spiritual existence, thought to be billions of years in the future (Steiner, 1990). Central to anthroposophy is the understanding of human beings as ‘threefold’ – comprising body (the physical vehicle), soul (ephemeral aspects of the personality such as sympathies and antipathies, emotions, desires and so on), and spirit (the person’s true individuality as a spiritual being, the only aspect that lives on after death) (Steiner, 1994). In common with the Theosophical Society, Steiner taught reincarnation and karma as facts of existence, with spirits incarnating in different bodies to learn lessons and purify themselves, advancing human evolution further. He also proposed the existence of beings not perceptible to the physical senses, such as angels, gnomes, and fairies.

To what extent is Waldorf education reliant upon anthroposophy? The movement certainly originated out of an anthroposophical impulse. Speaking to the first Waldorf teachers in Stuttgart, Steiner talked of the spiritual significance of their work:

“We can accomplish our work only if we do not see it as simply a matter of intellect or feeling, but, in the highest sense, as a moral spiritual task. ... We wish to begin our preparation by first reflecting upon how we connect with the spiritual powers in whose service and in whose name each one of us must work.”

(Steiner, 1996, p. 33)

On another occasion, Steiner emphasised that

“All teaching, education, and upbringing at the Waldorf school is to be based entirely on anthroposophical insight into human nature.”

(Steiner, 1995, p. 43)

It is thus clear what Steiner’s intentions were with regard to the anthroposophical basis of Waldorf education, but to what extent do today’s Waldorf teachers work out of anthroposophy? This is difficult to judge, not least because teacher training courses vary widely in their emphasis – some are more practical, others more philosophical – and furthermore, not every teacher in a Steiner school will have completed a Steiner teacher training course at all. Yet those who have will certainly be familiar to some extent with Rudolf Steiner’s esoteric ideas; from my research into UK Steiner teacher training courses, I have found that all feature Rudolf Steiner’s *Study of Man/Foundations of Human Experience* lectures as a core text, and many also recommend reading of *How to Know Higher Worlds* – Steiner’s guide to opening one’s spiritual (clairvoyant) perception. Trainee teachers may or may not be introduced to the wider anthroposophical worldview of human evolution espoused in Steiner’s *Cosmic Memory* and many other works, but by the time they finish their course they will almost certainly have been exposed to the concepts of threefold man, karma and reincarnation. Nevertheless, some Waldorf critics appear to have read more of Steiner’s works than many teachers have.



II. **C**CRITICISM: “STEINER SCHOOLS ARE SECRETIVE ABOUT THEIR ANTHROPOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS”

Critics of Steiner education have pointed out that schools can be secretive, or at least not sufficiently forthcoming, about informing parents and policymakers of their anthroposophical roots. According to PLANS:

“Waldorf presents a beautiful environment, a curriculum that appears to be completely integrated with artistic activities, and teachers who dedicate their lives to the school. If parents ask about Anthroposophy, the religious sect behind the school, they are told that the teachers study it, but it has no place in the classroom. Unfortunately, this is all a false front. Since the beginning, Waldorf schools have kept parents in the dark about the real intention of Waldorf education, which is to guide the reincarnation of the children's souls.”

(PLANS, Inc., 2012)

Similarly, in Part II of the critical series on Steiner education featured on David Colquhoun's blog, the authors highlight the omission of anthroposophy from a school website (something which I verified for myself by visiting several Steiner school websites, which feature detailed descriptions of the curriculum and methods, but nothing explicit about anthroposophy or spiritual science), and continue to write:

“[The] concern about mentioning Anthroposophy is driven by a fear that an undercurrent of critical analysis will become mainstream.”

(Anon, 2010)

A related controversy arose in January 2012 when a representative of Leeds Steiner School, when probed on Twitter about whether the school planned to teach the National Curriculum or “anthroposophy and Steiner values” if its application for state funding were successful, replied: “No anthroposophy, no Steiner values. Just great education” (Hamberg, 2012). (To what extent anthroposophical teachings infiltrate the content of what is taught to children, is a question that will be dealt with later.) This is further evidence of a Steiner school seeking to distance itself from the

philosophy of their namesake, if only for PR purposes. But as Alicia Hamberg comments on her blog:

“All this means is basically that waldorf [sic] school teachers won’t stand in front of their classes giving lessons on anthroposophy. It’s more likely anthroposophy will never be mentioned, but still have a huge, though less direct, influence on everything that happens in the school, from the subjects that are taught, how they’re taught, when they’re taught to how teachers interact with students to the traditions and rituals that are observed.”

(ibid.)

In an online discussion with me in 2011 on the same blog, Hamberg wrote:

“When a waldorf teacher speaks of ‘developing free individuals’ it could mean: this child’s actual life or this ‘spirit’s’ spiritual progress over several incarnations. I have no doubt that waldorf teachers work on the latter. But they aren’t honest about it. Thus, every time I hear these words and expressions — is this ordinary language or should I interpret it anthroposophically? And, since waldorf proponents are rarely upfront about it, I would advise people to assume the latter — it’s the anthroposophical meaning we’re talking about. Then, suddenly, the message doesn’t seem so appealing anymore — to people who are not anthroposophists!”

(Hamberg, 2011)

In my questionnaire, Waldorf proponents were asked to respond to this allegation of secrecy. Many conceded that schools might appear “secretive”, when in fact some individuals are simply not very good at communicating anthroposophical ideas, or they have a limited understanding of anthroposophy themselves. Some pointed out that there is a difference between not being explicit about anthroposophy, and actively trying to conceal it. Someone suggested that the allegation was unjustified because the schools bear Steiner’s name, and anyone can do their research and find out about the anthroposophical origins.

Personally, I agree with critics that anthroposophy is not discussed as often or as openly as it should be, but based on my experience and common sense, I would not attribute this to an insidious conspiracy. It is more likely due to poor communication, or else teachers are simply trying to explain their practices in layman's terms and do not consider it necessary to mention anything esoteric.

I do think that some within the Waldorf movement have a conflicted relationship to anthroposophy, in the sense that they believe in its tenets, but prefer the outside world not to know this for fear of ridicule or persecution. But if schools are indeed working out of anthroposophy, they would do better to own it, communicate it and be proud of it, than to hide it and compromise their integrity and authenticity. Greater clarity and communication is called for; schools and individuals need to establish what their relationship to anthroposophy is, and find a way of explaining this – to parents especially – in a way that is authentic, but also accessible. For example, if teachers are influenced by Steiner's ideas, then in what way do these come into play in the classroom? What is understood by 'body, soul and spirit' and what is their relevance to education? These kinds of questions could be discussed in teachers' meetings and the findings communicated to parents.



III. **C**CRITICISM: “STEINER SCHOOLS ARE RELIGIOUS / ANTHROPOSOPHY IS A RELIGION, NOT A SCIENCE”

The question of whether Steiner schools are religious schools or not is a contentious one; it impinges upon the nature of anthroposophy itself. Waldorf proponents often point out that anthroposophy is not taught to students, whereas in traditional Catholic or Church of England schools, for example, religious doctrines feature explicitly in the curriculum and in the life of the school. But this argument usually fails to satisfy critics. On his website Waldorf Watch, Roger Rawlings writes of his own Waldorf education:

“In my class’s first [eurythmy] performance, coming in about the third or fourth grade, we enacted the creation of the world — the emergence of light, the separation of light from darkness, the separation of dry land from the waters, and so on. We portrayed angels and archangels and the fulfilment of God’s commands. (In a wholly nonsectarian, non-denominational way, of course. Waldorf schools usually deny that they have a religion agenda. Please.)”

(Rawlings, 2012)

Meanwhile, the PLANS website quotes well-known Waldorf teacher and author Eugene Schwartz as saying:

“I send my daughter to a Waldorf school so that she can have a religious experience. ... When we deny that Waldorf schools are giving children religious experiences, we are denying the basis of Waldorf education”.

(PLANS, Inc., 2012)

When asked to comment on this issue, many respondents to my questionnaire noted that there is a difference between religion and spirituality and that all good education should have a spiritual element within it, and pointed out the non-denominational nature of Steiner schools and the respect for diverse religious traditions. Some conceded that aspects of Steiner education, such as the observance

of festivals, the telling of Bible stories and seeking to instil a reverential feeling in children, could be seen as religious. A class teacher wrote:

“By some people's definition of religion, Steiner schools are religious. Both the practices and the philosophy give people ground to think that. There's no way around that. By my definition of religion, they're not. No, hold on: by my definition of religion they don't have to be, although sometimes they are. I tell prospective parents we're spiritual but not religious.”

Another respondent, a Waldorf proponent, was particularly forthright:

“Steiner schools aren't founded on recognised educational research as state schools claim to be. They are founded on faith in Steiner's clairvoyant ability - faith that when he saw into the spiritual world, what he saw was true and not a fantasy. ... So to me it looks like a faith but not a religious one. If I were having to characterise Steiner schools, I would say that 'Faith School' is the best fit.”

On the other hand, another respondent wrote that, “if you prefer education with no underlying picture of human development you have plenty to choose from!”, whilst someone else went further, suggesting that state schools do work out of an underlying belief system – a reductionist-materialist one, which is never discussed with parents. It is true that every teacher has their own particular worldview which may influence their work to a greater or lesser extent, so one could argue that a teacher who is an anthroposophist should be subject to no more scrutiny than a teacher who is a Christian, a Buddhist or indeed an atheist – as long as they do not impose their beliefs on children.

Nonetheless, it is debatable whether anthroposophy is in essence a belief system at all, or if it is in fact a path to knowledge; certainly it could be used as either, or both, by different people. In my view, Steiner himself is at least partially responsible for the confusion, because on the one hand he gave people tools to help them on the path to knowledge, and it is my conviction that he would have preferred people to follow their own path rather than to treat him as a guru. On the other hand, Steiner made many statements about the nature of the universe (as well as guidelines for education) which are derived from his own clairvoyant visions of the “supersensible world”. Assuming that most of us have not attained the level of

clairvoyant perception that Steiner had, and seeing as the man himself did not go to great lengths to discourage blind belief amongst his followers, are we really supposed to take his pronouncements on faith? If so, then this version of anthroposophy fits the dictionary definition of religion as “a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe”. From this perspective I think the critics are entirely justified in calling Steiner schools, or anything arising out of anthroposophy, a religious enterprise.

As to the question of whether anthroposophy is a science, as in Steiner’s favoured term ‘spiritual science’, or a religion as some critics claim, questionnaire responses were divided. One person observed that few anthroposophists had “got beyond the word ‘spiritual’ in ‘spiritual science’”. Another respondent suggested that the prevalent definition of science was narrow and outdated, and that anthroposophy could be considered a science or a religion depending on the context. Someone else suggested that by ‘spirit’, Steiner meant something akin to human creativity. On his blog, Stephen Sagarin offers a unique and intriguing take on the subject:

“Geisteswissenschaft,” literally, “spiritual science,” refers in German universities to what we call the humanities. Some claim that ... Steiner, among others, [used] the term in a “new way,” but I would argue that, if anything, they’re actually reclaiming its older sense. That is, they aim to understand literature, philosophy, history--the humanities--as clearly and objectively as natural scientists aim to understand the natural world. Owen Barfield sometimes described his work in history and philosophy as aiming at a “science of meaning.” I believe this is exactly what Steiner meant by spiritual science, and what we (used to) mean when we studied the humanities.”

(Sagarin, 2009)

Though Sagarin’s explanation sounds plausible, I cannot be sure if this is the correct interpretation of “spiritual science”. I always thought that Steiner used this term because he believed one could observe their own inner life (of thoughts, feelings, desires and so on) with the same curiosity, discipline and objectivity as scientists study the physical world. Either way I do not think there is a strong case for having anthroposophy recognised as a science at the present time.

Furthermore, there is no escaping the fact that anthroposophy as a *belief system* will attract scepticism and even hostility in today's rationalist, scientific society, and will appeal to but a small minority of people. With that said, there is an aspect of Rudolf Steiner's work that is often forgotten: that is, he developed a new basis for moral action in his book *The Philosophy of Freedom*, which predates his involvement in the occult and is markedly free of esoteric or clairvoyant references (Steiner, 2008). Steiner had a radical vision of human beings acting not out of compulsion by bodily impulses or external laws, but motivated solely by their own individual ethical intuitions drawn from the universal 'sphere of ideas'. He termed this philosophy 'ethical individualism'. In an online article entitled "Is the Language of Theosophy Outdated?", writer Tom Last links the widespread criticism of Waldorf education to Steiner's mystical teachings, but highlights, in contrast, the enduring appeal and relevance of *Philosophy of Freedom*:

"I advocate emphasizing that the core of anthroposophy and Waldorf is *The Philosophy of Freedom* which is independent of any group, dogma, or faith-based belief system. While Steiner's far out sounding clairvoyant readings are the focal point of a worldwide attack on Steiner and Waldorf education *the Philosophy of Freedom* remains untouched by public criticism and instead finds even respect in the general public discussion. ... Steiner recognized the limited life of his other books and lectures while he said the *Philosophy of Freedom*, which is about the fundamentals of knowing intended to make us all spiritual scientists rather than merely Steiner devotees, would endure."

(Last, 2009)

In what way the ideas put forth in *The Philosophy of Freedom* apply to education is a new discussion altogether, and it is something that I for one would be very interested in exploring, though it is too large in scope for this dissertation. If it is true that *The Philosophy of Freedom* is the core of Waldorf education, perhaps it is worth noting that only one or two of the UK Steiner teacher training courses feature it as a core text for study.

From my perspective, basing education on a set of beliefs like anthroposophy is problematic, simply because there is no empirical evidence for proposed

phenomena like karma and reincarnation. Nor is there any means of proving the existence of a spiritual world, or of elemental beings or angels. As for Alicia Hamberg's assertion that Waldorf teachers work on children's spiritual progress over several incarnations, I do not know to what extent this is true, nor do I know how a teacher would go about such a task; it seems incredibly presumptuous, but then Steiner did connect certain physical traits in children with past life tendencies, thus he did not discourage teachers from making these kinds of judgements. Personally I do not think speculation about past or future incarnations is of any practical use in education. If I were a teacher I would work with the immediately observable nature of the child, and I would do what I could to help them overcome any difficulties, build on their strengths and fulfil their potential in this lifetime, but I would not find it appropriate (or possible, for that matter) to go beyond that.

Nevertheless, many of Steiner's ideas are of a more practical nature and could be taken on as a working hypothesis, rather than a set of beliefs. (It would be even better if the ideas could be subjected to formal research.) Steiner's suggestion that the change of teeth signifies a child's readiness for formal learning might sound silly (Steiner, 1995), but in my opinion it is no more dubious than the seemingly arbitrary starting age set by the UK government, which is four years. The so-called Rubicon at age nine, when children supposedly experience a shift in consciousness that leads them to begin to question authority, is something that could be observed for oneself, as is the need for adolescents to be stimulated in using their newly acquired powers of independent judgement. With any theory of Steiner's that has a practical application, teachers can test it through their own observation and, if found to be unhelpful or downright false, they can discard it. However, in order to do this, I believe it would be beneficial if Waldorf teacher training courses offered students more opportunity to critically compare Steiner's child development theories with those of other educationalists and modern pedagogical research. Whilst in my experience, many of Steiner's insights as described above are valuable and accurate, the exclusive focus on "what Steiner said" about child development is limiting and would be better balanced alongside other views. I feel this would consolidate students' study of Steiner rather than watering it down.

A class teacher who responded to my questionnaire had this to say when asked to respond to the allegation that anthroposophy is an occult religion, not a science:

“What Anthroposophy is *supposed* to be is a path of personal development, one that Steiner thought was suitable for Western people in the early 20th century. What Anthroposophy often is *thought* to be is “what Steiner said.” A lot of what Steiner said can be classed as philosophy, and lots more of it is “an investigation into the spiritual worlds.” And the result could be called “occult knowledge,” certainly. What matters, though, is how every school and every teacher approaches all of this. For me, it is an inquiry and an investigation above all. I engage with it, it enriches my thinking and understanding, but I do not “believe” it or “follow” it or anything of the sort.”

This is akin to the idea of using *Philosophy of Freedom* (in my opinion Steiner’s most essential exposition of his self-development path) as the basis for education, and it is also in keeping with my suggestion to use Steiner’s ideas as a working hypothesis or a source of inspiration rather than a belief system.

A final aspect that needs addressing is the extent of anthroposophy’s role in teaching; it is well known that anthroposophy influences the methods in Steiner schools, but to what extent does it infiltrate the content of what is taught? I have read anecdotal reports of Waldorf pupils being taught about the mythical continent of Atlantis as if it were historical fact, as well as deplorable theories about racial hierarchies (thankfully this appears to be extremely rare). The Class Four “Man and Animal” main lesson as outlined by Steiner teaches an unconventional view of the animal kingdom in relation to human beings (Steiner, 2000). There is also the tangential question of science teaching, and whether the Goethean approach favoured in Steiner schools is “real science” or not. Dan Dugan of PLANS thinks it is not, and that was one of the main reasons why he withdrew his children from a Waldorf school and subsequently founded PLANS.

In a response to one of my questions, a Waldorf representative wrote that:

“The teacher needs to work with those aspects of anthroposophy that relate to education and child development. What else they do in their private lives is up to them. There are aspects of the `spiritual philosophy` as you call it that should not impinge on their work as teachers. ... I think [teachers] exceed their remit when they introduce biodynamics to the gardening lessons without a very explicit rationale.”

In conclusion, this issue needs to be discussed amongst Steiner practitioners and, once again, their relationship to anthroposophy requires clarification: is it a belief system, a hypothesis, or a self-development path? If Steiner education is based on a collection of mystical beliefs, then I would argue that the ‘faith school’ label fits. This depends entirely on how the individuals involved are using anthroposophy, though, so it may not apply to all Steiner schools. That they acknowledge a spiritual dimension to human existence cannot alone make them religious schools; even the National Curriculum aims to promote pupils’ “spiritual development” and help them cultivate their own “inner lives and non-material wellbeing” (Department for Education, 2011). It is also worth noting that PLANS’ lawsuit against US state-funded Waldorf schools for promoting religion was twice dismissed, as it was deemed that anthroposophy did not meet the criteria to be called a religion (Anon, 2012).



IV. **C**CRITICISM: “RUDOLF STEINER WAS RACIST / STEINER SCHOOLS ARE RACIST”

One of the most challenging aspects of Steiner’s teachings for his proponents to deal with is that he made some controversial – nay, offensive – comments about race. Many critics have honed in on these statements and used them to discredit Steiner and cast suspicion on his whole body of work. One critic has gone as far as to argue that Steiner’s racial doctrines are central to anthroposophy and that the movement was thus inextricably linked to German nationalism and paved the way for Hitler (Staudenmaier, 2009). Furthermore, a few people have claimed to encounter overt racism in Steiner Waldorf schools (Anon, 2008).

This is another extremely complex topic and is itself worthy of a dissertation, so regrettably I can only skim its surface within my present constraints. I will start by looking at some of what Steiner apparently said. This is problematic in itself because much of the offensive material has not been translated into English by anthroposophical publishers; thus, for the most part I am relying on the translations of Roger Rawlings, an ex-Waldorf pupil and now Waldorf critic, who reads German. I have selected a few quotes from Steiner featured on Rawlings’ website; I include his references beneath the quotes.

“One can only understand history and all of social life, including today's social life, if one pays attention to people's racial characteristics. And one can only understand all that is spiritual in the correct sense if one first examines how this spiritual element operates within people precisely through the color of their skin.” [Rudolf Steiner, VOM LEBEN DES MENSCHEN UND DER ERDE – ÜBER DAS WESEN DES CHRISTENTUMS (Verlag Der Rudolf Steiner-Nachlassverwaltung, 1961), p. 52.]

“While there should have been basically only one form of human being ... Lucifer and Ahriman preserved [earlier human types] ... Thus, forms that should have disappeared remained. Instead of racial diversities developing consecutively, older racial forms remained unchanged and newer ones began to evolve at the same time. Instead of the intended consecutive development of races, there was a coexistence of races. That is how it came about that

physically different races inhabited the earth and are still there in our time although evolution should really have proceeded...” [Rudolf Steiner, *THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN* (Anthroposophic Press, 1990), p. 75.]*

“The color [sic] which comes closest to a healthy human flesh color is that of fresh peach blossoms in spring. No other color in nature so resembles this skin color, this flush. The inner health of man comes to expression in this peach-blossom-like color; and in it we can learn to apprehend the vital health of man when properly endowed by soul. If the flesh color tends toward green, he is sickly; his soul cannot find right access to his physical body ... Between whitish and greenish tones lies the healthy vital peach-blossom flesh-tint. And just as we sense in green the dead image of life, so we can feel in the peach-blossom color of the healthy human being the living image of the soul ... You experience the world as color and light if you experience green as the dead image of life; peach-blossom color, human flesh-color, as the living image of the soul; white as the soul-image of spirit; black as the spiritual image of death.” [Rudolf Steiner, *THE ARTS AND THEIR MISSION* (Anthroposophic Press, 1964), pp. 93-94.]*

“Younger souls — the majority at any rate — incarnate in the coloured races, so that it is the coloured races, especially the negro race, which mainly brings younger souls to incarnation.” (Steiner, 2008)*

“Each person proceeds through race after race. Those that are young souls incarnate in the races that have remained behind on earlier racial levels ... Our own souls once lived within the Atlantean race, and they then developed themselves upward to a higher race. That gives us an image of the evolution of humankind up until our time. In this way we can comprehend how to justify the principle, the core principle of universal brotherhood ... Our souls march from one level to the next, which is to say from one race to the next, and we come to know the meaning of humanity when we examine these races.” [Rudolf Steiner, *DIE WELTRÄTSEL UND DIE ANTHROPOSOPHIE* (Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1974), pp. 153-154.]

“[Future human evolution] cannot happen in the world without the most violent struggle. White mankind is still on the path of absorbing spirit more deeply into its essence. Yellow mankind is on the path of preserving the period when the spirit was blocked from the body ... [T]he result will have to be that [mankind’s next step upwards] cannot happen differently than as a violent fight between white mankind and colored mankind in the most varied areas ... You see, we stand before something so colossal that, if we regard it through the diverse perceptions of spiritual science [i.e., Anthroposophy], we will in the future recognize it as a necessary occurrence.” [Rudolf Steiner, DIE GEISTIGEN HINTERGRÜNDE DES ERSTEN WELTKRIEGES (Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1974), p. 38.]

(Rawlings, 2012)

The starred (*) references above are available in English on the online Rudolf Steiner Archive, so I have verified that these quotes are legitimate and contextually accurate. The others are from obscure German-language sources that I was unable to verify. Personally I think that these quotes constitute sufficient evidence that Steiner did indeed believe that humans evolved through a successive hierarchy of races. How fundamental this belief is to the anthroposophical worldview is a separate question. Only a fraction of Steiner’s substantial body of work deals with this subject, and it is quite likely that this material was never intended for a wide audience.

There are many articles on the internet that attempt to absolve Steiner of racism, or at least mitigate it with quotes that express Steiner’s progressive, universalist values. I cannot cover this in depth here. Nonetheless, for the sake of balance I will give a couple of examples.

“The anthroposophical movement...must cast aside the division into races. It must seek to unite people of all races and nations, and to bridge the divisions and differences between various groups of people.”

(Steiner, 2009)

This suggests that, although Steiner apparently believed in the superiority of certain races, he did not intend for this view to inform human action in a

discriminatory way; rather, the opposite – humankind should cooperate and coexist in unity, free from superficial divisions.

The Philosophy of Freedom itself appears to be incompatible with the idea of grouping human beings into categories based on their race, as Steiner writes:

“It is impossible to understand a human being completely if one makes the concept of the genus the basis of one's judgment.”

(Steiner, 2008, p. 204)

Steiner continued to write that any human being has the capacity to liberate themselves from superficial groupings based on their “genus” (characteristics like race or gender) and become free individuals. This conflicts with the above quotes where Steiner assigns characteristics to certain races. Clearly Steiner had some contradictory ideas.

Initially I was disappointed to find that of the twenty or so questionnaire responses from Waldorf proponents, no one seemed aware of the worst of Steiner's racist statements. Some seem to think that the controversy relates only to Steiner's adoption of the theosophical term “root race”; others are only aware of relatively mild examples of political incorrectness, for example, referring to American Indians as “savages” – which is usually deemed excusable because of the era in which Steiner lived. A common, rather glib defence of Steiner is that his quotes have been “taken out of context”, but based on the quotes above, I cannot imagine a context that would absolve them of racism.

Then again, one could argue that it is a good thing that so few Waldorf proponents are familiar with the racist elements of Steiner's teaching and that, in any case, Waldorf educators have no reason to be aware of it, unless they have studied critical websites or sought out this material. To my knowledge there is nothing in Steiner's education lectures that could be termed racist. So does it matter that a small, obscure portion of Steiner's work is racist? Daniel Hindes of the website *Defending Steiner* thinks not. In an email correspondence with me, he wrote:

“Whether and how Steiner should be considered a “racist” is truly an academic question; it has almost nothing to do with modern Waldorf schools.”

A former Waldorf pupil made the same case in an online discussion:

“I was educated in a Waldorf school in South Africa during apartheid. At the time this was the only school that had children of different races and creeds learning together in the same classroom. ... I am always so grateful to have had this learning opportunity and I believe it to have coloured my life experience in such a way that racism is something I cannot tolerate.

Not everything was perfect. 20+ years ago the festivals had a decidedly Christian flavour. Today (in this school) the festivals draw on traditions from all the faiths and it really is a multicultural experience. I am also a little familiar with Waldorf in Israel and there are initiatives to educate Arab and Jewish children together. So while there are very out of touch ideas in anthroposophy, I did not see evidence of that in my life and in my experience. ... I don't think the race theory sheds much light on Waldorf education today.”

(Anon, 2009)

As I mentioned, the responses to my questionnaire did not tackle Steiner quotes head-on. No one claimed to have encountered racism in a Waldorf school, whilst many said that they had never encountered it. A few seemed to be unaware of the racism controversy, and amongst those who were aware of it to some degree, the general consensus was that the perception of Steiner as racist was based on misunderstanding, quotes taken out of context, or the era that Steiner lived in, pre-political correctness. Had respondents fully investigated the phenomenon, I do not think they would be able to dismiss criticism so easily.

One respondent had a useful suggestion that directly applies to today's schools:

“[Steiner schools] are eurocentric, even in places like South Africa (where they do Norse mythology!) Their eurocentricity is something that needs to be addressed and could easily be viewed as subliminal racism.”

Ultimately, if the quotes attributed to Steiner are legitimate, then I have to state the obvious: there are overtly racist elements within Steiner's body of teachings (whether one can thus call anthroposophy racist depends on your definition of

anthroposophy – see discussion in the previous section). One could argue, however, that the racist teachings are irrelevant to the work of educators, and the fact that Steiner expressed some deplorable ideas about race does not preclude his suggestions for education – or other human endeavours for that matter – being useful.

With that said, Steiner's racist quotes are not going to go away, and if people in the Waldorf movement remain silent on the issue or are unaware of the extent of it, they are likely to appear suspicious or even secretive. This is unfortunate, because in my experience Waldorf proponents are far from racist and are in fact more likely to actively oppose all forms of prejudice. A greater awareness of the topic and openness to discussing it – even an official disavowal of Steiner's racial theories (though I foresee that this may still fail to satisfy critics) – are called for.



V. **C**CRITICISM: “BULLYING IS JUSTIFIED IN STEINER SCHOOLS, ON THE GROUNDS OF KARMA”

Another common concern, both based on people’s real-life experiences in Waldorf schools and extrapolated from Rudolf Steiner’s teachings on karma, is that Waldorf teachers fail to intervene in cases of bullying because they believe it is a necessary experience for the child’s spiritual growth. Here is a passage from Steiner’s *Karmic Relationships* that seemingly supports this idea:

“The judgments man has in physical life on earth are, in fact, different from the judgments he has between death and a new birth. For there the point of view is changed. And so it is, if you say to a human being here on earth — a young human being, perhaps—that he has chosen his father, it is not out of the question that he might make objection: “Do you mean to say that I have chosen the father who has given me so many thrashings?” Yes, certainly he has chosen him; for he had quite another point of view before he came down to earth. He had the point of view that the thrashings would do him a lot of good.”

(Steiner, 2010)

One might argue that this pertains to the spiritual world only – that a person cannot know what one’s karma is once in the physical world, let alone someone else’s karma. Nevertheless, I have come across many anecdotes from ex-Steiner pupils and parents who claim that Waldorf teachers did nothing to stop bullying behaviour, or blamed the victim, or used inappropriate methods to try to resolve the issue, such as putting the bully and the bullied in the same class or intentionally seating them together. Unless karma was explicitly expressed as a rationale, one cannot be certain of teachers’ motivations in cases such as these – they may be oblivious to the problem, they may be too busy to deal with it, or they may not have been trained in tackling behavioural and disciplinary issues. It is also plausible that some may indeed believe that the bully and the bullied are merely reversing the roles they played in a past life, and that if the situation is not allowed to play out, it will only be delayed until a future incarnation – that it is for the child’s own ‘good’ to have the experience now. To me this is a repugnant excuse for failing to act in a protective and compassionate

manner towards victimised children, but it is not much different in character to other more banal excuses that a teacher could conceive of to justify inaction: “It’s just kids being kids”, “It’s classroom banter”, “A bit of rough and tumble is good for children”, “[a sensitive child] needs to develop a thicker skin”, and so on. Clearly this line of thinking is not always inherently bad, but there is a fine line between allowing children the space to develop useful life skills in conflict resolution and standing up for themselves, and allowing vulnerable children to experience damaging psychological trauma at the hands of bullies. My own experience suggests that teachers in mainstream schools also frequently fail to discern where that fine line is. (To clarify: I am talking here about cases where children are being singled out and persistently targeted, not about two-way conflicts that unavoidably crop up in human interactions, where both parties are on an ‘equal footing’ and are able to resolve an issue between themselves. Clearly teachers cannot and should not be expected to spot and assuage every little dispute that arises between children.)

Nevertheless, this is clearly a topic with strong and emotive implications, and thus teachers need to clarify – to themselves and to parents – the place of karma in the classroom, if any. Personally I do not feel that it has any practical application, and am inclined to agree with one critic who noted:

“[As] a guide to action, a belief in karma may often be harmless, but it is not any real use. If you want to do good, you do not need to do it because it’s your karma to do so. ... [On the other hand] if your motives are not so good, that’s where karma can cause a huge amount of trouble in offering a very handy excuse.”

(Hamberg, 2010)

I should note that the questionnaire responses from Waldorf proponents on this issue unequivocally condemned bullying and especially the notion of condoning bullying for karmic reasons. Some claimed to have no idea that this was a common concern amongst Steiner critics, and that they had never encountered such a phenomenon in Steiner schools. A few said they knew it happened but only through reading about it. One teacher acknowledged:

“Yes, it happens. Yes, it is terrible. It does not happen everywhere. This is, in my opinion, a poorly through-through interpretation of some things that Steiner said. Karma is a complex, nuanced idea that is oversimplified and applied carelessly as a matter of course.”

In general, the anthroposophists I know of believe karma to be reconciliatory, not punitive, regardless of what Steiner actually said, and they feel that in cases of bullying, it can be the teacher’s karma to step in and deal with the situation. In any case, it is plausible to me that many Waldorf-trained teachers will not have had much exposure to Steiner’s teachings on karma, particularly the more controversial statements he made such as the above. The only statement of Steiner’s that I came across during my training that I found potentially troublesome (in the context of bullying) was in *The Kingdom of Childhood*, in relation to bad behaviour in the classroom:

“As a general rule it is very bad indeed to take notice of something that is negative.”

(Steiner, 1995, p. 61)

When I read this I envisaged that teachers might use it as a basis for ignoring problems, in the hope they would disappear by themselves. However, my own admittedly limited experience in Steiner schools suggests that teachers there are aware and empathetic enough to deal with cases of bullying and victimisation, and I am inclined to believe that ‘turning a blind eye’ is the exception rather than the rule. I acknowledge though that no one can have enough experience to make generalisations about a worldwide schools movement, so this really comes down to anecdotal evidence and opinions only. The best practice would be to admit that we – all schools, Steiner, state and otherwise – have a long way to go in tackling bullying, and that in every case, awareness, compassion and positive action are called for in the present moment, regardless of beliefs about past lives.



VI. **C**CRITICISM: “STEINER SCHOOLS ARE ANTI-INTELLECTUAL AND HOLD CHILDREN BACK”

Writing this, I have in mind Alicia Hamberg and Roger Rawlings, two former Waldorf pupils who are now Waldorf critics, and both of whom claim that their education failed to meet their intellectual needs. Hamberg says that she was discouraged from pursuing her academic interests (Hamberg, 2011), and Rawlings writes that his schooling left him “intellectually starved” (Rawlings, 2012). Meanwhile Geoffrey Ahern, researcher and author of *Sun at Midnight: The Rudolf Steiner Movement and Gnosis in the West*, goes so far as to assert that “no one should go to a Steiner school if they want competitive intellectual training”, and mentions a survey in which the alumni of one Steiner school reported feeling “a sense of academic inferiority later in life” (Ahern, 2009, p. 103). I have no doubt that some Steiner schools, just like some state schools, fall short of academic excellence; but the real question is, is it possible that there is an anti-intellectual bias inherent in the Waldorf philosophy itself?

One of the key features distinguishing Waldorf from the mainstream is its gentle, gradual approach to learning, “where education is a journey, not a race” (to quote several Steiner school websites). This is appealing to many parents who feel that the emphasis on early reading and writing in state schools, and the seemingly ever-increasing pressure to perform in national tests and exams, is too much, too soon. According to Steiner’s model of child development, children up until the age of seven live mainly in the will and thus imitation is the pedagogical focus; from seven to fourteen, the capacity of feeling is being developed, and thus children need to be educated through the arts, and only after puberty is the child really ready for intellectual education. Rudolf Steiner himself did imply that introducing academic work too early could hinder spiritual development:

“It is a very bad thing to be able to write early. ... A child who cannot write properly at thirteen or fourteen ... is not so hindered for later spiritual development as one who early, at seven or eight years, can already read and write perfectly.”

(Steiner, 1995, p. 27)

From this quote alone, we can see how, if Steiner's guidelines are adhered to rigidly, a culture of holding children back could become engrained in Waldorf schools. If a teacher believes that delaying reading and writing benefits the child's spirit, they may well be inclined to follow this policy even if it goes against the wishes of the child, even perhaps the wishes of the parent. It could be argued that this is not the hallmark of a child-centred education that caters to the needs of diverse individuals. On an online forum thread about Steiner education, an ex-pupil wrote:

“I was academic, fairly intellectual and ahead of much of the class as a kid and found the borderline anti-intellectualism of some - note some, not all - of the teaching staff alienating and, for me, very invalidating as it seemed to denigrate or minimise the worth of things I was good at.”

(Anon, 2011)

No doubt this is simply the opposite of what occurs in more academically-oriented schools, where children less proficient in academic work feel excluded and undervalued. Even so, it is still far from ideal, especially if these attitudes are widespread in the Steiner movement (which I cannot be sure of either way).

According to Steiner, there exists in the world interplay between two demonic forces, termed Lucifer and Ahriman, which seek to pull human beings out of balance and into extremes. The luciferic force represents ungrounded spirituality, fascination with the aesthetic, man striving to be a god, fantasy and illusion; while the ahrimanic force represents densification, materialism, over-reliance on technology, and cold intellectualism. Our present era, according to anthroposophy, is thought to be an ahrimanic age, with our dependence upon rationalistic thinking and abundance of modern technology; thus arises a suspicion of everything deemed 'ahrimanic' which can lead, in my experience, to a subtle mistrust or even demonization of the intellect. Certainly, intellectual thought and scientific endeavours must be imbued with warm feeling and ethical sensibility. But in shying away from 'cold intellectualism', are Steiner schools perhaps swinging too far towards the other extreme, perhaps even falling prey, in their own terms, to the luciferic force? This seems like a subject worthy of further consideration.

With that said, I think there may be merit in learning at a slower pace than is currently in vogue, and until more research is done in this field, this debate, especially concerning early literacy, will always come down to opinion and speculation. There is already at least some evidence that beginning formal learning later does no harm to later academic performance, and may even be beneficial. The PISA study comparing school starting age in different countries with students' academic ability later in life, for example, suggests that earlier is not necessarily better (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, 2009).

Many respondents to my questionnaire emphasised that intellectual learning has its place, but should not be favoured at the expense of other types of learning. One parent wrote:

“My daughter is very academic and in state school that was being pushed at the expense of all other types of learning. At Steiner I feel she has a chance to explore other aspects of herself. In my experience she has sometimes been bored but the teachers have been very aware of differentiation and catering to her needs.”

A former class teacher responded:

“I have seen so many students really excel, some of whom might have failed in other settings. A reluctance to test, track and assess is not the same as a reluctance to nurture excellence.”

One person suggested that a greater emphasis on formal exams in Steiner schools might be a good idea. They went on to comment:

““Holding children back” is interesting as I feel that state schools can be seen to “push children too fast.” I think both parties are guilty and am not entirely sure what a child's natural pace is.”

Someone pointed out that many Steiner graduates go on to university and are successful academically. A few respondents highlighted the importance of maintaining high academic standards in the Upper School, and one person had additional suggestions as to how to bring Steiner education up-to-date:

“It becomes difficult to justify some practices when teaching of sciences, maths and literature in the Upper School falls short and is poor and criticism is actually justified. But even in the lower classes it might be important to rethink aspects of curriculum and methods to be more realistic and responsive to what children experience and need now, almost 100 years after Steiner formulated his ideas.”



VII. **C**CRITICISM: “WALDORF PUPILS ARE EXPECTED TO IMITATE TOO MUCH, AND IMITATION IS NOT CREATIVE”

Much is made of the fact that Waldorf pupils learn (to a certain extent) through imitation, especially that they all paint the same watercolour pictures; this is often described as ‘creepy’ or simply uncreative (Dugan, 1994). Personally I consider this to be one of the weaker criticisms of Steiner education. In keeping with Steiner’s guidelines, I believe that imitation does play a useful role in education, up to a point. For example, it is true in my experience that young children in particular absorb everything from their environment, including the behaviour and speech of the adults around them, and for this reason I think Steiner’s admonition to teachers to be excellent role models is very wise. Imitation also works well in foreign language lessons for young children; I was impressed and surprised to observe that a class of nine-year-olds in a UK Steiner school all spoke with impeccable German accents, because of their ability to imitate exactly what they heard from the teacher. With regard to painting, I think there is good sense in teaching children to be proficient in artistic techniques, even if that means that their free creative expression is limited for the first few years of school; I have seen Class Eight/Upper School artwork that is consistently outstanding, which suggests that this approach may indeed have merit in the long run (more research should be done in this area). I also visited a Swiss Steiner school where the Class One teacher was trialling a new method whereby children had weekly opportunities to paint freely with acrylic paints, in addition to the usual watercolour technique.

I discovered a forum post on this subject, written by someone who was Steiner-educated but, in their own words, “a long way from being a Steiner advocate”. Nevertheless, they hold a positive view of the way art was taught:

“[Someone wrote] that the approach to drawing was too prescriptive and stifled 'self-expression'. ... I actually disagree with this particular idea. ... Though getting all kids to draw the same thing might seem a bit controlling, I'd connect it less to being prescriptive than to the neoclassical idea of *imitatio*. In this approach (practiced by Michelangelo's Renaissance sculpture workshop among countless others) students of an artistic form imitate works

created by masters of the art, until they've learned the skills they need to create their own. A violin teacher would hardly be described as 'stifling self-expression' if they encouraged a pupil to follow the sheet of music and hold the instrument properly; if you take a longer view, the practice of being a bit prescriptive about drawing/painting etc subjects is more about giving kids confidence and skills so they can go on to express themselves in a more satisfying way, with greater mastery of their chosen medium. ... There are some artistic skills that you just need to practice, lots and lots, before you master them - and imitation is a tried and tested way of practicing.”

(Anon, 2011)

An explanation of the approach to painting in the book *Steiner Education in Theory and Practice* supports this idea:

“During the first three of four classes in Waldorf schools, the teacher should take the greatest possible care to allow the painting of the children to grow out of the characteristics of the various colours, and not allow them to paint objects of the external world, objective nature. Such a procedure, [Steiner] claimed, constitutes a fundamental training in aesthetics. Far from allowing the children to paint themes from external nature according to their own whims and fancies, the teacher should take on the responsibility of guiding them at every turn; the time for “free expression” is to come later.”

(Childs, 1991, p. 168)

Meanwhile, responses to my questionnaire were consistent in condemning the use of imitation beyond the appropriate age:

“Imitation is very appropriate in young children because it always spins off into creative play and takes them into other places, conceptually. Beyond early years? Not appropriate: copying stuff from the blackboard, for example, is just bad practice, in any kind of school or system.”

“It is essential that this has gone as a way of learning by 9 years old, or it is an indicator of major problems.”

Another respondent commented:

“The pedagogy is a seed which is slow to germinate ... I think it is a certain amount of impatience which elicits this kind of criticism, it is necessary to look at the pupils at the upper end of the school.”

Someone else had an interesting perspective on painting:

“To an outsider observing guided watercolour paintings, it looks as though the children have all produced the same thing. But the beauty in my opinion lies in the subtle differences created. This goes for chalkboard drawings too. These subtle differences are in my opinion pure, unintentional and unconscious springs of creativity; far more 'real' than if you were to tell the children to paint what they liked - they'd all paint something they'd seen before and thinking would take over, leaving the doing aspect (the point of such activities) by the wayside. I think imitation is a lot trickier than we give credit for and I think the focus required to imitate well is a useful [thing] to nurture.”

VIII. **C**CRITICISM: “WALDORF EDUCATION IS NOT SUITED TO EVERYONE”

This is certainly one of the milder criticisms of Steiner education; nevertheless, I wanted to feature it in my questionnaire to Waldorf proponents, as I hoped it would prompt an interesting discussion about the pros and cons of the Steiner approach, and ideally might even help us to get closer to defining the essence of Waldorf education itself. Could there be principles within Waldorf that are universally applicable and useful? Or is it really only suited to artistic children, or the children of anthroposophists, as the critics would have it?

Respondents to my questionnaire generally agreed with the notion that Waldorf education is not suited to everyone. A few had a more nuanced view, that the principles are universally applicable but the way they are put into practice in some cases may not suit some individuals:

“Waldorf *schools* are not suited to everyone. ... Waldorf education is suited to everyone, but finding a setting which and practitioners who can make it work for *everyone* is of course impossible.”

Some also pointed out that Waldorf education may suit most children, but it will not necessarily suit all families, especially if the principles go against those of parents. One teacher wrote:

“In a way you could say that it benefits imaginative, artistic children most -- because they sigh a sigh of relief when they come to it, usually -- but is this true? Could one not argue that it benefits the unimaginative, not-artistic child (supposing such a child exists, which I'm not sure about) the most, because it gives them an opportunity to develop exactly what it is they're lacking?”

In any case, we are only manifesting one small part of the potential of Steiner education in Steiner schools as they are today. Our perception of what Steiner education is, is quite narrow and limited.”

To summarise, then, the way that Waldorf education manifests itself in today's Waldorf schools will not suit all children. However, I believe that the key principles of...

- Age-appropriateness – meeting the child where they are at
- Teaching 'in context' – from the whole to the parts, drawing on real life and human experience as far as possible
- Teachers undertaking a path of self-development
- Viewing each child with objectivity and love, recognising their individual nature and helping them develop to their full freedom and potential

...could be put into practice and prove useful in any context. These principles are not owned by Waldorf education, and may not even be practised in all schools bearing the name of Steiner. As the teacher above posits, I believe that – just as we need to go beyond our definition of anthroposophy as “what Steiner said” – we also need to expand our view of what Steiner education is, beyond simply “what happens in Steiner schools”.



IX. **N**EGATIVE EXPERIENCES IN STEINER SCHOOLS: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THEM?

There is another category of Waldorf critics on the web: they are parents who are not critical of the schools on philosophical grounds, but because they sent their child(ren) to a Waldorf school, and had a negative experience. (Some of them now home-educate their children according to Waldorf principles, which demonstrates that they are not opposed to the approach *per se*.) In some cases, the philosophy might be implicated in the criticism – for example, in cases of bullying which are not dealt with, a subject I have already covered. But for the most part, the fault seems to lie with individual people or individual schools. One has to bear in mind that in real-life communities such as Waldorf schools, not everyone will fit in or get along with everybody else; there may be personality clashes and misunderstandings, and on the internet, you usually only get one side of the story. I try to remember this when reading about people’s negative experiences. Nevertheless, I find it impossible to dismiss them entirely as many of the stories are not isolated cases, but rather have similar threads running through them – families being ostracised or blamed when they report a legitimate concern, for instance, or people being subjected to grossly unfair, unprofessional or even illegal treatment by individuals within schools. I saw little purpose in contacting many of these people over the internet, as their stories are highly personal, often took place in other countries and tend to speak for themselves, but I did contact one mother in the UK who had written her story online. She described her family’s experiences:

“For many years we were happy. The first problems came when our daughter began refusing to stay at school in Class 1. We discovered much later that she had been badly bullied. We always felt there was something wrong at school. They felt she was emotionally disturbed because of our parenting. At one time Social Services were called in. The school had accused us of abuse. After Social Services exonerated us, our daughter was asked to leave. She then went to the local village school where, after a term she attended normally and was happy. We felt very let down as our daughter was a creative and spiritual child who, we felt, was the most suited of our children to Waldorf education.

Our eldest son was happy at the Waldorf School. ... He was, however, dyslexic and I couldn't get specialist help for him because the school refused to refer him to an educational psychologist. After leaving at 16 he went on to Sixth Form College but left after a few weeks because he couldn't cope with academic education. He has an IQ in the gifted range but has worked in unskilled jobs ever since. We feel that help with his dyslexia at school may well have helped him to find a more fulfilling path in life.

We had always been on a low income. We were assured when we first committed to the school that we could pay what we could afford, but as new parents came in, rules were changed and we got into debt. Eventually we were given 2 days to clear our debt and borrow enough for the next 3 years fees or leave! Our son insisted upon leaving as he didn't want us to get into debt. He then had to go to a state school some distance away and couldn't adjust to the different educational system. Eventually I educated him at home until he was 16.”

In response to my question about the role of anthroposophy in Steiner education, she wrote:

“I believe there are schools in the US called Waldorf Inspired where aspects of Waldorf Education are integrated into state schools. I think if I were to do it again I might consider such a school if there were one in this country. ... I feel Anthroposophy in its current form can be dangerous and extremist. If it could move on and grow with the times it might be less so. I often thought it might be better to consider not just what Steiner said but what he might say if he were alive today. He was, after all, living in a totally different age.”

When questioned about her hopes for the future of Waldorf, she had some interesting suggestions:

“I think parents need to be properly informed about anthroposophy and its beliefs before committing to the education and I think this should be a legal obligation. I think the way bullying is managed has to change to some extent ... and there needs to be a place outside the school where parents can complain if they feel they are not being heard at the school. ... I also feel

proper facilities for special needs children should be provided and parents should have the same access to educational psychologists as at state schools. For all of this to happen, Waldorf Schools probably need to become state funded. ... There is a lot in Waldorf education that I feel is good.”

Writing to an online support group, one mother described the situation thus:

“I think that the individual schools can become like huge, dysfunctional families and each should be judged on a case by case basis...I do think that the way they are structured, there is much room for dysfunction.”

(Anon, 2007)

This made me wonder if perhaps the lack of hierarchy in schools can in some cases foster an unhealthy, insular culture lacking in responsibility and accountability, which allows problems to spiral out of control and culminates in families leaving (or being thrown out of) schools feeling unheard and abused. I have no doubt that there are equally shocking stories involving state schools as well, but still I feel that the nature and consistency of these claims makes the structure of Waldorf schools worth looking at, and adjusting if necessary.

Part Three: A Wider Perspective

I. **W**ALDORF PROPONENTS' ATTITUDES TO CRITICISM

Of twenty or so respondents to my questionnaire for Waldorf proponents, a large majority said that they were aware, or very aware, of the online criticism; however, this reveals little or nothing about the wider movement, as the people most likely to respond to my questions were precisely those who were familiar with or interested in the subject. Nevertheless, the responses are worth highlighting. Most respondents acknowledged that there is some truth in the criticism, although many feel that it is largely based on misunderstanding or misinformation. Many also agreed with me that critical views for the most part had not been appropriately or adequately handled by the Waldorf movement. One respondent, who engages regularly with critics online, wrote:

“The criticism is always worth paying attention to for a number of reasons:
1. Each one is expressed by a person with feelings, longings and hopes;
2. Valid points are made, there is truth in some of the criticisms. I know this from my time as a parent, trustee and chair of trustees;
3. Criticism shows how Waldorf is perceived by a section of the population. When I was a head I always listened carefully to people who were criticising myself or my school. This doesn't mean that I acted on what they said, but from it I could glean how in some way or other what I or my school was doing was not fulfilling people's needs. Again I would add that I didn't think I had to fulfil everyone else's needs. But sometimes it was helpful to me especially in seeing how I or the school appeared to others. What one has to learn to do is to accept negative comments assertively. This does not mean proving them wrong but owning the criticism when it is valid.”

Many of the other respondents expressed a sense of futility in engaging with critics, essentially because they feel that critics have already made their minds up

against Waldorf education and are unable or unwilling to have a rational, open dialogue about it. (It appears that both sides perceive one another this way.) One respondent articulated it thus:

“There is some truth and validity in all criticism. What I find most difficult is the phenomenon that lies behind this kind of approach, i.e. deconstruction and analysis in order to prove an already adopted position. ... It is being done right now to every philosophy, every belief system, every political stance, every governmental policy initiative. If [Waldorf critics] were to engage in constructing something, for example a new approach to education, they would fall apart within a day or two, they would have absolutely no common ground.”

Another respondent was in the unique position of being both a Waldorf parent and a committed rationalist who considers anthroposophy to be “nonsense”, and yet he regularly finds himself defending Steiner education from what he sees as the “tendentious irrational arguments” and “rhetoric” used by critics. He wrote:

“I do not think SWE [Steiner Waldorf Education] should be exempted from critical analysis. I do however take exception to Steiner detractors simply attacking SWE using pejorative language (e.g. describing SWE as a 'cult') or quote-mining Rudolf Steiner's utterances for material supporting their pre-judged position that SWE is bad.”

He went on to suggest that a more constructive approach would be for “open-minded critical thinkers” to engage in “exploring all aspects” of Steiner education – the good, the bad, and everything in between. This concurs with another respondent’s view that a true debate would involve back-and-forth discussion akin to Platonic dialogue, with both sides growing in understanding.



II. **T**HE FUTURE OF STEINER EDUCATION

I feel that Steiner education is at a critical point in its evolution. It remains to be seen whether it can evolve and adapt to meet the changing needs of our time, or whether it will cling to tradition – and at that, a tradition that originated in another country, in another language, almost a century ago. I was interested to know how the future of Steiner education was envisaged by its proponents – and its detractors.

The prospect of state funding in the UK is one factor that has significant implications for the Waldorf movement. I always thought that government support would help Steiner schools move away from the fringe and into the mainstream, affording them better resources and making them accessible to a much wider demographic. Without funding, I thought, Steiner schools would only ever appeal to the same niche: the alternative community – and more specifically, those able to pay the fees.

However, I know that not everyone agrees. One person that I corresponded with foresees that state-controlled Steiner schools would find themselves “strangled by over-regulation” and would “cease to exist”. They added:

“Having taught for over 35 years in state schools, been a headteacher, worked with parent bodies, local authorities, governors, as an in-service trainer, researcher, etc., my experience has been that there are many people who really would not want Steiner education. I actually think it is only a smallish part of the population who do want it.”

Another respondent supports state funding, but believes that the niche appeal will endure:

“Any alternatives to the mainstream, even within the maintained sector (i.e. state funded Steiner schools) will appeal to a niche. That is the whole point, not everybody wants the same. It’s called diversity!”

They also believe that many in the Waldorf movement would be resistant to the changes brought about by state funding, as people have become so inured to financial struggles:

“Failure is a necessary part of the recipe and too much success would take people out of their comfort zones.”

As I have already discussed, anthroposophy when used as a belief system or religion is problematic, as Steiner’s assertions about the spiritual world cannot be proven and contradict the modern rationalist worldview. I posed a question to Waldorf proponents about whether a spiritually-oriented movement could thrive, or even survive, in a sceptical-scientific age, and – further to this question – whether Waldorf education could exist independently of anthroposophy. The responses were interesting:

“(We must) let go of the idea that only Steiner approaches are spiritually oriented and be more open to other approaches and understandings.”

“The age was much more sceptical 90 years ago – there is much more interest now than even 50 years ago. Can we evolve? Only if we take Steiner’s ideas seriously, understand them and where necessary translate them into contemporary language. We have to see that there is no Steiner program – only the challenge to develop stronger psychological insight, ‘read the child’s needs’ and find imaginative ways of meeting them.”

“While I wouldn’t throw all of Steiner’s views on science overboard – I would jettison some and radically modernise the content of science education.”

“The actual words of Dr Steiner are 100 years old – do not keep reading from the book as though it is a religious text. His indications need to be made relevant in whatever worldly conditions prevail. If Anthroposophy were to die off the fundamental spiritual, human truths will not and shall be ‘rediscovered’ and rewritten.”

“Having a PhD in the philosophy of science, I know for a fact that the supposed conflict between [science and spirituality] is largely constructed by the media in order to sell papers. The few scientists who claim to be against

spirituality are really railing against conventional religion. The two, however, are not to be conflated. ... We live in an *age of convergence*, not a sceptical-scientific age, where science and spirituality are coming together.”

“Can a school be a Waldorf school if the teachers aren't on some self-development path? Yes, in name, but not in essence.

Does it have to be anthroposophy? No, and it usually isn't, not entirely anyway.

Do teachers have to believe in what Steiner said? No.

Mostly, teachers have to ask themselves these questions. Why do I teach this at a certain age? What is happening to the child at each stage? What can I bring to the child from the world out there that will meet them where they are, and let them see that they're not alone, that others have been through the same journey? You don't have to give the same answers that Steiner did. But I do think, if you're not asking these questions, it's not really Waldorf.”

Additional suggestions from Waldorf proponents to help Steiner education progress and evolve included: renewing/deepening understanding of anthroposophy; re-evaluating aspects of the curriculum and methods in the light of present-day needs (perhaps dropping eurythmy in the Upper School or introducing more sports, for example); working on a more international level as a movement; raising standards of teacher training and granting formal accreditation to courses; strengthening links with other schools, both mainstream and alternative, and conducting more formal research and contributing to mainstream publications.

Some critics also expressed their expectations and suggestions for the future of Waldorf education:

“I think it is likely that Waldorf education has a promising future and will continue to expand. I see no reason for it to cease to exist. There are many possible changes that would be beneficial, in my view. ... I think a thorough review and revision of several of the pedagogical tendencies that distinguish Waldorf schooling in its traditional form from other varieties of alternative

education would be a good idea, including the reliance on temperaments and the assessment of spiritual qualities on the basis of physical traits. In addition, some sort of straightforward reckoning with the legacy of Steiner's racial and ethnic doctrines is long overdue.”

“I'm sure Waldorf will continue to exist. If it could learn to do it honestly [i.e. be open about anthroposophy] and discard Steiner's harmful doctrines like racism and pseudoscience, it could even become respectable. ... I think it would be great for teachers to take the good things from Waldorf [teaching in blocks, integration of art into all lessons, integration of music and movement]. Just don't take the training (cult indoctrination)!”

“I don't see much of a future for Waldorf. They've had plenty of time to accept criticism and refuse to change ANYTHING about the way they do business... in fact they have become even more underhanded in trying to avoid criticism. I don't think they WANT to change... so discussing it is pointless.”



III. **I**N CONCLUSION...

This has been an extremely challenging project to undertake, as I can understand and empathise with both ‘sides’ of the debate, and can find examples from my own experience in Steiner schools that lend credibility to both positive and critical views. I believe that Steiner education is still in its infancy, and ideally, over time it will distance itself from esoteric, theosophical language and find a more rational basis for its practices that are communicable and understandable by the general public. The alternative is to cling to mystical beliefs and an ‘us vs. the world’ mentality, which may keep purists happy, but it will prevent Steiner education widening its sphere of influence and enriching educational practice as a whole – which I strongly believe it has the potential, even the obligation, to do, as there is much within it that is of value. State funding of Steiner schools may be a risk on the government’s part, but it will add much-needed variety to the educational choices on offer in the UK, and will increase accountability and hopefully encourage the constructive sharing of ideas and practices between mainstream and Steiner schools. A more formal teaching qualification for Steiner practitioners would also be welcome, so that Waldorf philosophy and practice could be critically compared with other schools of thought, and ideally it would also include specific training in areas like spotting learning difficulties early-on.

Specific aspects of Waldorf pedagogy that I admire, and that I feel could enrich education as a whole include: the importance of creating an aesthetically-pleasing and harmonious environment for children; the emphasis on personal and creative development for teachers; arts and crafts being valued alongside academics; fostering respect for the natural world; the continuity of the class teacher years; experiential learning; the importance of the spoken word; the lack of reliance on teaching materials, like technology and textbooks, which can be overused in other schools; the innovative approach to teaching foreign languages (introducing them early and with songs, games, rhymes and so on); integrating art, music and movement in lessons and engaging the whole body during learning; contextualising learning; fostering a love of learning for its own sake rather than for the purpose of passing exams; recognising children as individuals and guiding them towards

reaching their unique potential and find meaning and purpose in their lives, and encouraging a healthy home life (limited television, good nutrition and so on). These elements are not dependent upon the mystical beliefs of anthroposophy, and I am certain that some of them can be found in schools without the Steiner label.

As for criticism, that will most likely continue to exist, and I maintain that the best policy is to deal with it in an open and balanced way. In my view, much of the hostility arises (like many conflicts) out of differing belief systems; in general, Steiner proponents are open to mystical and spiritual ideas and believe that these can play a legitimate role in education, whereas the most vocal critics are rationalists opposed to mysticism and think that science, not spirituality, should inform pedagogy. I can understand both viewpoints and thus it is impossible to take a clear stand for one or the other. It appears that many people on both sides have made up their minds, one way or another, and there is little chance of finding common ground in such circumstances. In keeping with Rudolf Steiner's idea on the threefold nature of things, I advocate finding a third way between the extremes, one which is not merely a compromise but may forge the beginnings of a new path and make the merits of Steiner education available to all – whether it still bears the “Steiner-Waldorf” label or not. This is what I envision when I talk of Steiner education ‘breaking out of its niche’; and by rising to the challenge and tackling contentious issues head-on as I have attempted to do in this dissertation, I believe that we can move closer towards this goal.

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Appendix I

Can the Steiner Waldorf schools movement break out of its niche by engaging with its critics?



I am a final-year student on the Steiner Waldorf Education BA course at Plymouth University, and the above is the working title for my dissertation. It is my intention to take an in-depth look at some of the criticisms levelled at Steiner Waldorf education, with a view to opening up a constructive debate with critics and ultimately presenting a balanced, hopefully unbiased perspective on the key points of contention. As someone who has studied Steiner Waldorf pedagogy for two years and is able to step back and take an objective view of its strengths and weaknesses, and having entered into a brief but productive debate with some of the most prominent blog critics in the past, I feel I am in a strong position to do this. I also feel it will become increasingly incumbent upon the Waldorf movement to openly address critical and sceptical views as more and more UK schools press for public funding. Ultimately I would like to know whether the Steiner Waldorf movement, by addressing its critics, can step out of its comfort zone and become more accessible to the wider world, and evolve to meet the needs of the future.

With this in mind I have prepared a questionnaire for individuals affiliated with Waldorf education, be they teachers, trainee teachers, support staff, SWSF members, or parents; in essence, anyone who has some understanding or experience of the Waldorf schools movement, and who is not hostile towards it (there is a separate set of questions for critics!). I would be very grateful if you would reflect on these questions and answer as fully as possible.

N.B. The questions are fairly in-depth and, it has been suggested to me, worthy of essay titles! Do not feel you have to spend hours on this, or fill all the space given. I appreciate whatever input you can offer.

You may answer anonymously if you wish, though it would be useful to at least know your connection to Waldorf education (that is, parent, teacher, etc.), if you prefer not to give a name.

Many thanks for your contributions!

- Daisy Powell

Questionnaire

Name (optional):

Connection to Waldorf education (circle/underline all that apply):

Teacher / former teacher / trainee teacher / former pupil / parent / SWSF member

Other:

Any other information you feel is relevant:

Question 1. *To what extent are you aware of the criticism being expressed, particularly on the internet, in regard to Steiner Waldorf education?*

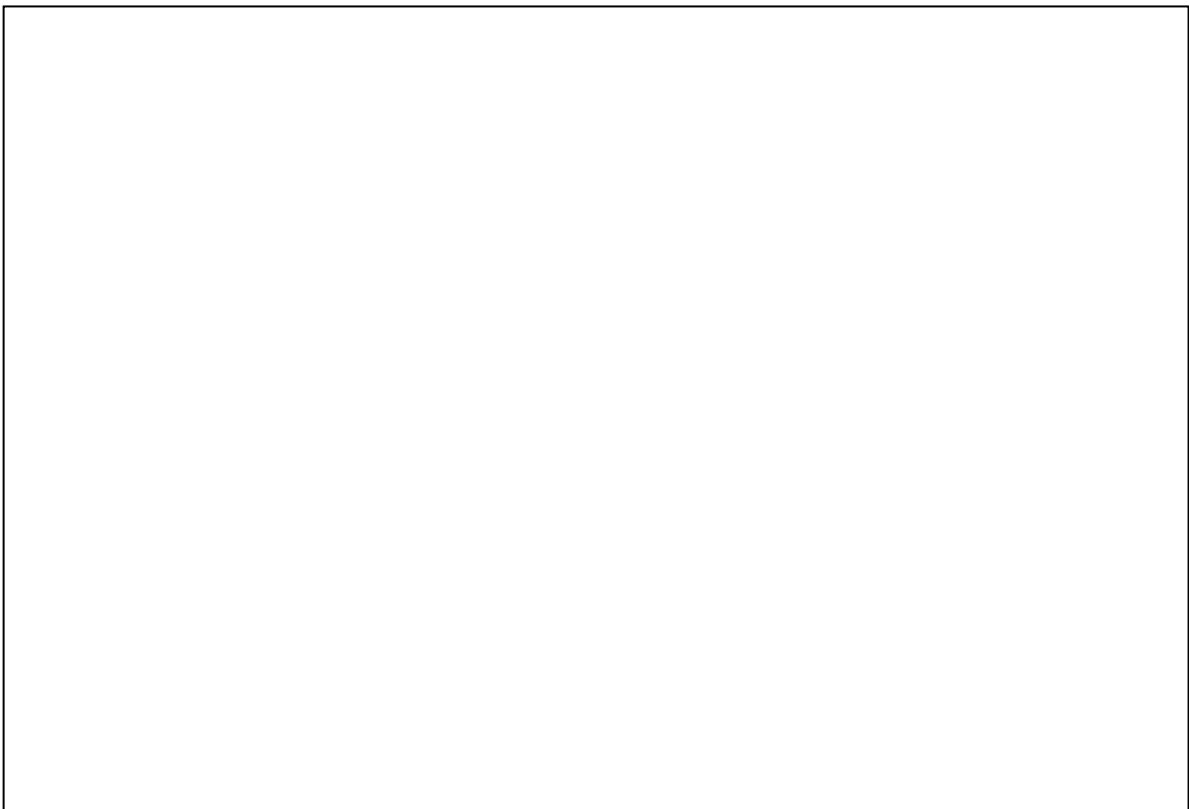
Question 2. *If you are aware of the nature of the criticism, what has been your personal reaction to it? For example, does it worry you, interest you, or are you indifferent towards it? Do you feel there is any truth or validity to the criticism?*

Question 3. *Have you ever had to/chosen to engage with critical views of Waldorf (that impinge upon Waldorf pedagogy/anthroposophy in general, rather than day-to-day issues that arise naturally in the course of school life)? Did this take place on the internet, in person or in some other form? Please give details if possible. If you have not, would you feel capable of defending Waldorf education against criticism?*

Question 4. *Do you think that criticism has thus far been adequately handled by Waldorf proponents, or do you agree with my assertion that a greater openness towards dealing with sceptics and critics is called for, especially in light of state funding?*



Question 5. *Some critics have branded Steiner schools as religious schools – discuss.*



Question 6. Do you view Steiner schools as a “niche” phenomenon, only appealing/accessible to a certain demographic? Explain your answer.

Question 7. How would you respond to the following common criticisms of Waldorf education, which implicate both its underlying philosophy and actual practice in schools:

“Anthroposophy is an occult religion, not a science.”

“Waldorf schools are secretive about their anthroposophical foundations.”

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“Bullying is justified in Steiner schools, on the grounds of karma.”

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a response to the preceding statement.

“Steiner’s teachings were racist/Steiner schools are racist.”

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“Steiner schools are anti-intellectual and hold children back.”

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“Waldorf pupils are expected to imitate too much, and imitation is not creative.”

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“Waldorf education is not suited to everyone.”

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a student's response to the quote above.

Question 8. *Do you see potential for the Steiner schools movement to evolve and meet the needs of the future? If so, how? Can a spiritually-oriented movement such as Waldorf education, struggling to find its feet in the public domain, realistically survive in the sceptical-scientific age?*

Question 9. *Some critics are wholly negative about Waldorf education, whilst many others have acknowledged that it has positive aspects, be they the ‘whole-child’ approach, the Waldorf aesthetic, or the emphasis on the arts. Some might suggest a fusion of ‘the best’ of Steiner’s ideas with other educational approaches, such as the typical methods seen in UK state schools, or less mainstream methods such as Montessori. Do you think such a fusion is possible/desirable? If so, what aspects of both (Waldorf vs. mainstream or other pedagogy) would you favour? Which would you drop?*

Question 10. Much of the criticism involves scepticism of or outright hostility towards what is seen as the “esoteric belief system” of anthroposophy. The website *WaldorfCritics.org* describes it as a “cult-like religious sect following the occult teachings of Rudolf Steiner”; a parent on an internet forum explained her decision to remove her child from a Waldorf school due to its underlying philosophy, despite being happy with the methods, saying, “If only I could find a school similar to Waldorf but without the anthroposophy”. Do you think Waldorf education could or should exist independently of anthroposophy? Or are its methods inseparable from the spiritual philosophy?

Appendix II

Questions for critics

What are/were the nature & extent of your involvement with the Waldorf world? (e.g. ex-parent/ex-pupil) Describe your experience in as much detail as possible, including any problems you had during this time.

What key criticisms do you have of the school(s) you were involved with? Do these criticisms apply, in your opinion, to the Waldorf movement as a whole?

Is your negative view of Waldorf informed to a greater extent by direct experience, or by what you have read from other people or of Rudolf Steiner's writings? Or have both factors had an equal influence on your views?

What is your attitude towards anthroposophy and/or Rudolf Steiner?

What are your motives for airing your critical views of Waldorf on the internet? For example, is it a cathartic way of healing from a negative experience, or do you hope to influence parents who are considering this type of education for their child, or campaign against state funding for Steiner schools, etc.?

Have you ever engaged directly with Waldorf proponents who have challenged your views? What was the outcome of this? How well (or not) do you think criticism and scepticism is handled by the movement?

Can you identify anything positive about Steiner education, whether from your own experience or that of others?

Do you think Waldorf education can exist without anthroposophy? Would it be better off without it?

Do you believe Waldorf education has a future? If so, how would you like to see it change? Or would you prefer it ceased to exist?

What is your view of state schools? How do you think state education could be improved, if at all? Do you think a fusion of the Steiner methods with other educational methods is possible/desirable?