

"Compulsory schooling was introduced in 1876 not primarily for the benefit of young people, but because with the curtailment of juvenile labour too many were making a nuisance of themselves on the streets."
Professor Alan Smithers

I am a great advocate of Steiner education, having trained as a Steiner Class teacher and Kindergarten teacher, and having worked as a Kindergarten and Parent and Child group leader since 1998. Even Neale Donald Walsch, in his celebrated book *Conversations with God*, found that, when asked, "God" Her-Himself advocated Steiner education as the nearest thing currently existing on the planet to a genuinely child-sensitive and humanly appropriate learning experience for children.

Yet I by no means want to claim that the Steiner approach has a monopoly on educational quality or wisdom. Steiner education isn't as successful as it is because it was Steiner who laid down the indications on which it's based, but rather, because Rudolf Steiner happened to have a deep insight into perennial wisdom and developmental insight about children that the vast majority of us simply don't possess. So Steiner education isn't right because it's Steiner education, but because it's founded in perennial wisdom and developmental insight that are *potentially available and accessible to all of us*.

On this view, there must be – and most definitely *are* – all kinds of possible approaches to children's education and learning which will be nourishing, developmentally appropriate and empowering for children – the small school movement, human-scale education initiatives, Montessori, Froebel, Summerhill, the Krishnamurti schools, and so on. What is very difficult for many parents is that the latter schools are commonly independent and fee-paying, which often simply rules out many families from these educational options altogether.

So when such parents have strongly held and principled objections to the centralised curriculum-dominated mainstream schooling system, what are they to do? Until recently, there was just one answer – home education. It is a fascinating and telling commentary on modern technological life that home education is currently booming – and even such mainstream educational academics as Professor Alan Smithers, of Buckingham University, are beginning to acknowledge it. In a recent article in Britain's *Independent* newspaper, Alan Smithers wrote an article entitled "Home education's time may have come" (Education & Careers Supplement, 19 June – see <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/alan-smithers-home-educations-time-may-have-come-849616.html>). In his article, Smithers quoted one parent who had educated his three children at home, thus: "Home educated children are, by and large, better educated, more socially competent and more

Human-scale education for the 21st century: from compliance towards empowerment



Written by Dr. Richard House

confident than their schooled contemporaries. The UK's schools, as a result of a long period of state interference, are an educational disaster area." He also quoted a recent issue of the *Journal of Personalised Education Now*, containing some 30 statements on what's wrong with schools, including "destroying the enjoyment of learning, causing stress and disillusionment, indoctrination into pecking orders and conformity".

Remarkably little is known about the extent of home education in the UK, we are told, with the best guess being that about 50,000, or about 1 in 200, school-age children are currently being educated at home. "Home education's time, therefore, may have come" in the UK, Smithers boldly proclaims – especially as it is listed as an accepted method of full-time education up to age 18, and it is exempted from the requirement to be following a curriculum leading to a recognised qualification. Its ranks could therefore be swollen in Britain by those wishing to escape the government's recent imposition of compulsory education on 16 to 18 year-olds.

But what if families are neither able to afford independent education fees, nor to educate their children at home, for whatever reason? In recent years, at least in Britain, the government has changed the law to allow parents to found their own community schools, and in this era of emerging individualisation or 'Consciousness Soul' (as Steiner termed it), it seems likely that this option will become increasingly available, certainly in the Western world. Yet how on Earth does one go about setting up a new school? Certainly, press reports here in Britain have predictably described how difficult a bureaucratic morasse one has to negotiate in order to set up one's own school (see, for example, 'Parents win right to set up eco-school in village woodlands', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2008 – at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2284913,00.html>).

So there are the practical, bureaucratic hurdles to surmount, which certainly demand a particular kind of expertise; but in setting up a

school, there are also *emotional*, and, dare I say, *spiritual* challenges to be met and risen to, as well. One of the wonderful aspects of many Steiner schools is that they are commonly built-up, from scratch, by a dedicated group of often diverse and individually-minded people, who need to find a way of working together sufficiently harmoniously in order to succeed in their task. There is something very extraordinary about the process of finding and forging a common shared path together, and one of the many virtues of this experience is that the school can really feel "owned" by both parents and children. The experience can also be exceptionally empowering. I have seen adults' lives and self-confidence profoundly and movingly transformed through the experience of founding a school, with all the responsibility and initiative-taking that is called forth in the process.

In Norwich, I was privileged to be there in 1998, right at the beginning of what is now the proud and successful Norwich Steiner School, starting with a tiny Toddler Group in a parent's front room. Being someone who is very interested in group dynamics and human (group) development more generally, I have thought quite a bit about the process we have gone through in founding our school; and I've come up with a list of ten factors which I believe need to be paid close attention in any attempt to found a new school. In the remainder of this article I set out these founding factors, in the hope that they will help TM readers whose destiny is to found a school for their children – for the cultural *Zeitgeist* seems to suggest that increasing numbers of parents will be embracing this option in the future. This list describes the principles involved in founding a Steiner school, but many, if not most, of them will be equally applicable to any other kind of human-scale education or self-help schooling initiative.

[1] Find **friends and like-minded people** in your local area who share a common desire for a different, holistically-informed educational approach for your children, and start to meet regularly. There will almost certainly be fitting places in your local community where you can advertise such a founding group; see also #8, below.

[2] Starting up a **study group** is very worthwhile - and a great place to start is to study Rudolf Steiner's excellent and accessible lecture series *The Kingdom of Childhood* or his book *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education*. It is also useful from the outset to read together some of the anthroposophical (Steiner-inspired) literature on community building, as you will inevitably encounter ordinary human difficulties and challenges in the course of building your initiative. In this sense, participating in building a school is very much a personal-developmental path for everyone involved. You could try starting with Frieddrich Glasl (1994) *The Enterprise of the Future*; Robert Rehm (1999) *People in Charge*; or Christopher Schaefer and Tyno Voors (1999) *Vision in Action: Working with Soul & Spirit in Small Organizations* (all published by Hawthorn Press, Stroud, UK). And most recently, there is Margaret van den Brink's excellent book, *Transforming Organisations* (2004).

[3] **Inform yourselves** about Steiner or holistic/human-scale educational philosophies through reading some of the vast literature that is available, and above all by visiting real schools, for it is only through direct experience, and by observing the qualities of holistically-educated children, that one can really fully appreciate the wonders of these educational approaches. Many Steiner schools and Steiner teacher training centres also regularly offer lectures, conferences, workshops and short courses about Steiner's various cultural innovations, including education.

[4] **Register** with - for example - the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, or Human Scale Education (in the UK; or the appropriate/equivalent national organisation in your own country) to enlist their support for your nascent educational initiative. In particular, inquire about and seek help with the structure and consensual working process of a new school. These are very important questions to begin considering from the outset, lest you construct organisational structures which unhelpfully work against the founding of a successful school and then prove to be very hard to 'restructure' once they have become entrenched. Part of this process will be to set up a charitable company or organisation, and your national education umbrella body will be able to help with this.

[5] Related to the last point, actively cultivate a **willingness to share power**, to empower each other, and to challenge unhealthy concentrations of power and responsibility in your growing organisation. Any new organisation is open and vulnerable to becoming the ground upon which people can 'act out' their desire for power, control etc. Very subtle balances need to be struck here - not least, that of how to create an organisation in which everyone involved will experience as empowering, yet without stifling the

healthy initiative of those who have more energy, time, and, even, ability to contribute to the organisation than others. In order to bring this about successfully, clear accountability structures and a deep understanding of the consensual decision-making process are pretty much indispensable prerequisites. Very clear descriptions of the various committees, and their respective responsibilities, will help all persons wanting to be actively involved in the school to perceive where their personal and specific strengths could best serve the growing school.

[6] **Start a Parent & Child group** in as beautiful and peaceful a setting as you can find. The beauty of these groups, certainly in the UK, is that they are still unregulated by the state, so you needn't worry about being instructed to impose an absurd 'nappy curriculum' encompassing early literacy and numeracy on the young children! Dot Male's book, *The Parent and Child Handbook* (Hawthorn Press, 2006) is a veritable goldmine for anyone wishing to start a Parent & Child group along Steiner-informed principles. Start as you mean to go on in terms of financing, making sure that you charge a fee that at the very least covers your expenses, plus a bit extra to start building up a working surplus for the initiative.

[7] Make enquiries about whether there are any Steiner or other **appropriately trained or experienced teachers** in the local area or region who might support your initiative, or even become directly involved. If you are lucky, you may well find a teacher locally who can be instrumental in helping you set up a Kindergarten or even the first class of a school. In addition, find one or more locals who wish to train as Steiner teachers, starting with Kindergarten or Parent & Child trainings - and start the training! (There are both full- and part-time Steiner trainings available in the UK, for instance.) Within a few years, you will then have trained and qualified Steiner teachers locally who can take the school-founding process forwards. More generally, the input of trained and experienced teachers into a newly developing initiative is crucial, if not indispensable, in order that the new initiative is properly founded in the educational philosophy and values on which your school is based.

[8] **Publicity**: early on in your initiative, it is important to research local publicity possibilities, and use them as much as possible to spread the word about what you are offering and planning for the future. You will be amazed at the number of like-minded people out there just waiting to find out about you. Above all, you can be very creative with publicity: a small publicity group of people with imagination and the capacity to think outside of the box is a great asset. Be aware that very large numbers of parents want something else for their children, based on their intuition alone, and they just need to find the school that meets their concerns and aspirations - your school. This is indeed commonly the way in which families come to Steiner education. Publicity is always a combination of genuine enthusiasm and clear information. Many recent studies in the fields of psychology, education and neuroscience are now corroborating what Steiner and other holistic educationalists have maintained over many decades, and it works very effectively

to utilise such modern knowledge to market the school, and your own particular educational philosophy.

[9] **Fund-raising**: before too long, if you follow the route of creating an autonomous school, the issue of fund-raising will come up, as it is unrealistic to think that parents alone can support all the costs related to the functioning of the school, at least in the short run. In Norwich, and in common with the experience of other Steiner schools, we have found that trying to raise funds from charitable bodies is very difficult, as we don't routinely cater for disadvantaged or deprived children. However, you may well find a wealthy, local benefactor or notable who really believes in the education, and is prepared to support you financially in the early stages. Other established, most if not all, Steiner schools have both traditional and more novel, idiosyncratic ways of raising funds, and it will be important both to inform yourselves of what has worked in other schools, as well as coming up with your own ideas that are unique to your particular circumstances.

[10] Finally, and above all, **the virtue of perseverance** is essential. There has never been any school (or human organisation, come to that!), including all Steiner schools, which does not from time to time experience challenges and setbacks, and even crises. The issue here is not somehow to expect your school to be a perfectly Utopian conflict-free school, but rather, that you are open to facing and meeting the challenges that will inevitably arise, with maturity, and see them as opportunities for individual and collective development. The excellent book *The Enterprise of the Future* (see #2, above) could be very useful in helping you to understand the normal evolution of an organisation, in turn, helping you pre-emptively to avoid such developmental crises.

If you succeed in achieving some or most of these founding principles, it is very likely that, before too long, you will have set up an organisation, and a community of parents, that will generate their own self-sustaining momentum - not least, because there is so much general disquiet with mainstream education that you will draw to yourselves a great deal of interest, once the quality of what you are offering is recognised in the local area.

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