

AUTHORITY, ANARCHY AND ANACHRONISM ON THE SLOPES OF SUSTAINABILITY: Steiner Waldorf pedagogy and the development of mature judgment.

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Abstract

Critics of environmental education and now sustainable development education are not slow to point out the tendency of environmentalists to overstate their case, and the tendency of some environmental educators to indoctrinate. A sustainable development rhetoric of urgency is in constant tension with a more conservative discourse of science that is faithful to falsifiability and uncertainty. An authentic discourse of sustainability must be acutely attentive to the agenda of values that underpins the conflicting positions staked out. In a recent paper, the author suggested that a consequence of failure in this matter is early closure in education – children and young people are pressurised to make judgments about many of the highly complex “big science” issues of twenty-first century living without sufficient opportunity to develop a necessary degree of wisdom. Early closure is expedient for pressure groups seeking converts to causes such as their particular view of sustainability before young people are distracted by the study of the “serious exam subjects”.

The theoretical base of the early closure argument was the rationalist approach to knowledge of Hirst and Peters. Some acknowledgement of a contrary existentialist by Michael Bonnett position was given. A new DfES funded study of Steiner schools in England has now offered another perspective on this issue. The most fundamental principle of Steiner’s philosophy is that of education towards freedom – the development of free thinking individuals. However, Steiner identified three seven year stages in the development of free thinking and proposed that young people begin to enter the world of mature judgment at around the age of 21. Between roughly the ages of 7 and 14, children are subject to the authority of the teacher, and this is also an aesthetic phase when feelings are more dominant than rational thought which begins to displace feeling from around the age of 12. The claim is that through this view of child development, young people acquire greater wisdom and ultimately greater freedom as adult thinkers.

The paper draws on a comprehensive literature review of Steiner education, a survey of twenty one of the twenty three English Steiner schools and detailed case studies of seven of the schools. It concludes that the Steiner Waldorf curriculum has been attentive to the needs of sustainability and the environment since many years before these became issues recognized by mainstream education. Steiner Waldorf pedagogy should be taken seriously for what it can offer to the debate on the development of mature judgment and the acquisition of the wisdom needed to engage in democratic societies that are attentive to challenges such as sustainability.

Introduction: Early Closure and Sustainability

The inclusion of climate change as a principal item on the agenda of the 2005 G8 summit of leading industrial nations at Gleneagles in Scotland demonstrates the degree to which environmental sustainability has risen from obscurity to become a mainstream political issue. In 1975, when the Schools Council published its ground breaking *Project Environment* series, environmental education was hailed by some as the way forward in bringing about changes in public consciousness and understanding. Children would receive education *about* the environment as well as going out of doors to be educated *through* it. Most significantly, education *for* the environment would bring about changes in the form of more pro-environmental public behaviour (Schools Council 1973; National Curriculum Council, 1989). According to Graham & Tytler (1993) these somewhat eccentric minority aspirations were tolerated by government “in the name of freedom”.

Three decades later, it is implausible to state that the G8 Summit has been principally the consequence of the children schooled in the 1970s growing up. Far more complex processes are likely to be in operation, not least of which would be the mainstreaming of climate change by the national media. Academic critiques such as Jickling (2001) or Bonnett (2000; 2002) have strangely found common cause with free market economists (Aldrich-Moodie & Kwong, 1997; Lomborg, 2004) in highlighting the conceptual unsoundness of the original education *for* the environment project. In spite of these, education *for* the environment has now transmuted into the confident assertion that “education is a primary tool in the critical endeavour of attaining a sustainable future” (Hopkins 1998). For those such as Hopkins whose convictions lead to the belief that this is a straightforward endeavour, the possibility that such a use, or misuse, of education might amount to indoctrination seems to carry little weight.

In a recent paper (Ashley 2005b) I put forward a critique of indoctrination within environmental education which attributed much of the difficulty to the problem of early closure. The argument was, in essence, that understanding sustainability is a highly complex undertaking that requires an extended period of learner development. This, I suggested, requires that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), rather than peaking in primary schools, needs to grow in significance during the years of secondary education and extend beyond into higher education and lifelong learning. My reasoning was that mature, well informed judgments about sustainability require the synthesis of

understandings in a range of disciplines that would certainly include science, geography, economics, sociology, politics at the very least. The inevitable result of such synthesis is a complexity and uncertainty that is far removed from the straightforward notion of education *for* the environment

This argument has brought me into conflict with the philosophy of the New Educational Movements (NEMs) of the 1980s. The “adjectival educations” - environmental, global, peace or citizenship, for example, all espouse a view of childhood based on the notion of the participant child citizen (Holden & Clough, 1998; Osler, 2002). The logic of this view centres on the belief that the difference between child and adult thought is principally quantitative rather than qualitative. Children, in other words, think the same way as adults, they are simply less knowledgeable and experienced. Optimistically and incoherently, however, the NEMs cling to belief that child thought nevertheless retains an innocent or uncorrupted world view (Kohlberg’s “intuitive justice” [Kohlberg 1974]) from which adults might somehow learn about how to achieve environmental sustainability and world peace.

I have faced the most profound difficulties in accommodating this view which seems to me to lead to the construction of children as “mini-rationalists”, a phenomenon both at odds with the view of children as sensitive to nature and logically incoherent with the view that children’s voices should be heard. At the same time, I have had difficulties in reconciling my early closure argument with a parallel argument that children are rapidly socialized into an anthropocentric world view in which concern for nature is the subject of meaningless rhetoric. According to the empirical work that supports this argument, most children and young people (even those claiming “green” credentials) treat the natural world as a commodity to be exploited (Ashley, 2005a; Ashley, 2000). Involvement in a DfES funded study of Steiner education has led me to the view that an evaluation of Steiner’s principles might contribute usefully to the process of resolving these difficulties.

Rudolph Steiner and freedom of thought

If the development of free, enfranchised citizens within a democracy attentive to sustainability is taken as a given, any contention centres on means rather than ends. Arguably, the NEMs grew out of a respectable tradition of professional freedom in curriculum development associated with Lawrence Stenhouse, Basil Bernstein and R.S. Peters himself. Teachers were encouraged in this tradition to view schools as experiments in practical democracy. The collapse of this view under the weight of the centralist direction of New Labour’s “national strategies” and the seemingly associated rise of reactionary fundamentalism and youth disillusionment with orthodox politics requires explanation.

The discussion of this question that I now wish to develop will draw on the notion of freedom that was postulated by the Austrian philosopher, Rudolph Steiner (1861 -1925), after whom the 870 odd Steiner Waldorf schools, distributed globally across 60 countries,

are named. There are 23 such schools in England which have recently been the subject of a detailed DfES funded study by the author and two colleagues (Woods *et al.*, 2005). Steiner schools have, as their ultimate goal, the development of fully free human beings, but operate from the postulate that freedom does not exist simply by virtue of an arbitrary declaration of human rights. For Steiner schools, freedom cannot be a method of education, but must be the end result of it (Howard in Calgren, 1972).

This view of freedom puts Steiner schools in conflict with the NEMs and the belief in children as citizens now. Contrary to a widespread public misconception that Steiner schools are anarchic or “free” in the sense of A.S. Niell’s *Summerhill*, these schools are in fact quite authoritarian. Until the age of 14, children are under the direct control of a class teacher with whom they remain, ideally, for eight years. Much faith is invested in the class teacher as the *authority who represents the world to the child*. A broad and comprehensive curriculum, based on Steiner’s careful observations of child development is followed. Though Steiner teachers pride themselves on the degree of autonomy and creativity they possess in relation to maintained school teachers, our own observations suggest that the curriculum is very similar in all the schools – to the extent that there is probably at least as much coherence, continuity and progression as in maintained schools conforming to the National Curriculum – possibly more (Woods *et al*, op. cit.).

The justification for the authority of the teacher is found in the anthroposophical principles that underpin the work of the schools. Anthroposophy was a word developed by Steiner after breaking away from earlier roots in theosophy and means literally “wisdom of man”. It is also referred to as “spiritual science” because it operates through a tradition of European idealistic philosophy derived from Aristotle, Plato, and Aquinas and looking towards an epistemology of super-sensible knowledge which Steiner claimed would be available to anyone prepared to cultivate the necessary mental faculties (Rawson & Richter 2000). At the very core of anthroposophy lies a deep rooted philosophy of freedom that seeks to liberate the human condition through the integration of science, art and religion. It may be unhelpful to perpetuate the synonym “spiritual science” in an age different to Steiner’s where the word “spirituality” has taken on many new meanings. Steiner’s use of the term has much to do with the freedom to form concepts out of the reality in which we live as human beings – an ultimate form of individual sovereignty. It is to do with our ability to attain knowledge outside the bounds set artificially by an empiricism limited by an ultimate, unchangeable, “objective” and “material” reality (Nordwall 1980).

This is most obviously manifest in the phenomenological approach to science, derived from Goethe, that is employed in anthroposophical pedagogy. Von Mackensen (1994) clarifies the choice between a pedagogy wedded to positivism which tends toward the manipulation of nature as something “out there” and the qualitative way Goethe understood science through recognising consciousness in perception. This recognition that human consciousness is a necessary part of scientific perception is said to be justified by new physics that has arisen from Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and “spiritual” is probably best understood through this line of thought.

Anthroposophy underpins a pedagogy of education towards freedom that sees the teacher's task in terms of facilitating children's growth through a series of stages that posit the immature child as qualitatively different in various ways to the mature adult. Crucially, a distinction is made between the dominance of *willing* (i.e. control of limbs) during the 0 -7 years, *feeling* (i.e. an intense aesthetic sense) during the 7 – 14 years and *thinking* (i.e. the unfolding of rationality) during the 14 - 21 years. It is at puberty that the young person comes to make judgments, form independent concepts and gradually direct behaviour according to conscious intentions motivated by ideals. Only when memory can function independently of sensory stimulus is abstract thought possible (Rawson & Richter, 2000: 15).

As with Piaget's notion of formal operational thought, children in Steiner schools would not, therefore be expected to exercise the faculty of rational judgment much before the age of 14. The affinity of Steiner's scheme with other forms of developmentalism and the potential shortcomings of these has attracted informed comment (Jelinek & Sun, 2003). It is possible that the anthroposophical view of child development escapes many of the criticisms directed at Piaget that have to do with the impoverishment of child thought (for example, (Donaldson, 1978; Jenks, 1996). Anthroposophy does not propose a developmentalism in which the earlier cognitive stages comprise less-sophisticated versions of the same rationalist adult thought. Thus the focus in work with 7 – 14 year olds is not on the limits of cognitive capacity so much as on the potentialities of the aesthetic sense and the role that the development of this will play in the young person's later development. Much work is thus done in developing imitation, observation, memory and imagination through aesthetic sensibility as a necessary precursor to rational and abstract thought

More directly, children would not be burdened with potential "adult" worries about the future of the planet, since Steiner education aims to develop confident, free adults through conserving childhood. The over-supply of information with the consequent threat to childhood is one of the reasons for Steiner Waldorf education's reluctance to introduce ICT before the age of 14 (Cordes & Miller, 2000). Several of the informants in our own study confirmed that the authority of the teacher is necessary to mediate the information that that would otherwise saturate children, desensitizing them and destroying meaning. At the same time, Steiner education is extremely open to the onslaught of challenges to adult authority that accompany puberty. Steiner described this process in depth and the accepted view in the schools visited was that upper school teachers cease to be the authority who represents the world to the child. Instead, they stand or fall on the degree to which pupils perceive them as *an authority on their subject*. Deep challenges and questions are to be expected.

Epistemological Limits of Rationalism

The early closure argument provides a powerful explanation for the conceptual confusions and practical muddles of ESD. It does not, however, provide a balancing explanation for the hegemony of anthropocentrism that is at the root of global failure to

achieve sustainability, and herein lies the difficulty. In this section, I consider the views of writers who consider that it is rationalism itself that results inevitably in this hegemony.

Bonnett (2000, 2002) in writing about sustainability has objected to the kind of rationalism espoused by Hirst or Peters on a number of grounds. The semantic objection is that affluent societies simply adapt the meaning of the word in ways that largely justify the status quo. The ethical objection is that the question of grounding the ethical dimension, as anthropocentric or biocentric for example, remains unsettled. The epistemological objection is that the existing state of knowledge does not allow us to judge which actions will ultimately contribute positively to sustainable development (Bonnett, 2002: 11). His overall conclusion is that the “right knowledge” on which to base a rationalist approach to sustainability does not exist. The profound implication is that any form of science deficit model is ruled out.

Bonnett’s conclusions are largely supported by my own work on science as a guide to environmental behaviour, which suggests that the necessarily conservative nature of the scientific enterprise renders science an “unreliable friend” to environmentalism (Ashley 2000). Bonnett’s views on a “right relationship” with, as opposed to a “right knowledge” of nature also resonate with my own work on the deeply anthropocentric nature of children’s environmental socialization (Ashley 2005a and forthcoming). The fundamental problem is that of how to justify “right relationships” and to encourage them in the young without recourse to alternative forms of indoctrination.

Bonnett’s approach is based on an alternative epistemology, which he associates with Heidegger, of knowing things as they are in themselves (Bonnett 1994). He makes the same point that has been repeatedly stressed by ecofeminists (Merchant, 1996; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Warren 2004) which is that rationalism is essentially manipulative. Not only does it objectify the environment as an entity to be exploited, thereby legitimating anthropocentrism, but at the most fundamental level it turns things in themselves into objects of thought (Bonnett, *op. cit.*, p129).

This argument, which leads to a non-exploitative mode of relating things, is not only a feminist one, but according to a body of literature on children’s spirituality, it is also a child viewpoint (Coles, 1992; Hay & Nye, 1998). Hay (2000) stresses the theme that there exists a relational consciousness within childhood that includes a relationship with nature. This consciousness is lost during adolescence, a fact which Hay attributes largely to the displacement of biological dispositions by cultural learning. In this, Hay finds cause with Gardner (1973), who has been critical of Piagetian developmentalism on the grounds that it sees all stages of children’s thought as rationalist and posits scientific thinking as the end stage of development. Multiple intelligences, in contrast, emphasise a more egalitarian pantheon of thought.

Gardner is concerned with how it is that a child of ten can be the equal of an adult in terms of aesthetic appreciation, and how it is that this aesthetic sensitivity begins to atrophy during adolescence. Dillon (2000) is a particularly committed advocate of what is

sometimes called primitivism, the notion of an innate child wisdom that is progressively lost to adults. For Dillon as with Hay, this is primarily a spiritual attribute and the concern again is with the absence of this quality from adult thought. As does Gardner, Dillon apportions significant blame to cognitive developmentalists influenced by Piaget, - in this case (Goldman, 1964) or (Fowler, 1981), who under the guise of religious development posit a rationalism which condemns children's acute spirituality as "undeveloped". Gilligan's feminist critique of Kohlberg's cognitive developmentalist approach to moral development completes a strong line-up against rationalist epistemologies of development (Gilligan, 1982).

A child developmentalist view is undoubtedly fundamental to anthroposophical pedagogy, as is an holistic view of science, art and religion (Woods *et al*, 2005). The crucial point is that Steiner's developmentalism differs fundamentally from the Piaget derived models. The aesthetic stage of the 7 – 14 years is not a "less developed" version of the cognitive-rational phase of the 14 – 21 years. Later forms rational thought do not displace aesthetic thought, but complement it. Similarly the willing phase of the 0 – 7 years is not to be thought of as merely an intermediate cognitive stage. The intense development of physical co-ordination during this stage is seen by Steiner as a unique and fundamental part of human development that has its proper and only possible place during the early years, when imitation is the principal form of learning.

Steiner and Gardner would seem to be in agreement with regard to the intensity of the aesthetic during middle childhood. The point of divergence is Gardner's puzzlement at the disappearance of this from adult thought and Steiner's conviction that, if allowed to grow and unfold properly during middle childhood, the aesthetic remains with the adult. The same can be said of the intense spirituality described by Hay and Dillon. The implications of this for sustainability are considerable, for if a childish delight in the "wateriness of water" (Bailey, 2000) remains in the adult psyche, it will presumably remain to counterbalance the rationalizations through which adults grow cynical and world weary. Contentment with things as they are in themselves is likely to be extended and the need constantly to "add value" to the natural world through exploitation and rearrangement of it concomitantly constrained. Such a contentment would be part of the fundamental freedom from economic determinism that is required to challenge the hegemony of anthropocentrism.

There is a heavy price to pay, however, in terms of Steiner's insistence on the authority of adults as fundamental to the unfolding of individual destiny towards freedom. It would be hard, for example, to reconcile Steiner's pedagogy of imitation during the early years with the democracy of the Reggio Emilio approach. It would be similarly hard to reconcile the desires of the NEMs to hear the voice of middle childhood with Steiner's insistence that the world of information be mediated for children by an authoritative adult figure.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Steiner education as an answer to the difficulties raised in this paper stands or falls on the degree to which it is successful in achieving the holistic outcome of an integration of science, art and religion that Steiner sought. Crucially, this is dependent on the rightness of Steiner's views on child development. If objectivist, rationalist thought simply replaces earlier aesthetic thought at puberty, then the outcomes of Steiner schooling will ultimately be little different to those of conventional schooling. If, however, the Steiner method achieves what Gardner and Hay have variously sought – the permanent incorporation of pre-pubertal qualities of aesthetic and spiritual awareness into adult consciousness alongside rationalist thought, then it is possible that genuinely free thinking adults who resist the anthropocentric hegemony may result.

Such adults might not need constantly to be persuaded for and against positions on sustainable development by conflicting scientific views or economic interests. Neither might they live lives of enslavement to the materialist promise of happiness through wealth accumulation, tied inevitably to exploitation of nature and the socially disadvantaged. Such a possibility is at once so startlingly fundamental and radical that serious empirical investigation of the outcomes of Steiner schooling are surely merited. Unfortunately, our own study was not able proceed this far, not least because of the extreme methodological difficulties of tracing an unbiased sample of former Steiner pupils. Such pupils are obviously highly dispersed and weakly concentrated amongst the general population.

A possible starting point for such study that presented itself was within the schools themselves where we noted the frequency with which Steiner educated pupils returned to become either teachers or parents (or not infrequently both). The schools and their associated communities do stand out against anthropocentric hegemony in various ways and we certainly encountered free thinking adults fiercely resistant in practical ways to New Labour bureaucracy. A respectful attitude to nature compatible with aspirations of sustainable living undoubtedly permeates both the curriculum and the building and management policies of the schools. This freedom and resistance was operationalised through teachers' willingness to work for considerably less than the agreed national salary scales for maintained schools. Such practical freedom contrasts with a rhetoric of resistance to OFSTED and centralist national strategies constrained ultimately by commitments to mortgages and the aspiration for a high material standard of living.

Against this, however, must be counted the traditionally isolationist stance of the Steiner schools and the degree to which literature by Steiner himself dominates the entire movement. The portrait of a stern Steiner, found almost inevitably in staffrooms and entrance halls, does little to allay the perception of a cult status and has uncomfortable associations with autocratic regimes that display portraits of their dictators. The fear that the integrity of the Steiner philosophy could be overwhelmed by a greater openness to other systems of thought is perhaps one of the great paradoxes that illustrate how far is the distance that still needs to be traveled.

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