

## **Individual Exemptions – an Unacceptable Compromise**

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), whilst refusing to address the need for Steiner Waldorf schools and kindergartens to be exempt from the learning and development requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), has suggested that it is sufficient for individual exemptions to be granted in response to parental request, “if they can show that the EYFS is in conflict with their beliefs or philosophies.” We do not believe that this is either acceptable or workable, for the following reasons:

### **Fundamental Principles**

- It is fundamental to the Steiner approach that intellectual development should not be forced, and that the primary aim of the early years approach is to facilitate children’s overall development in a sympathetic environment until they are ready for more formal instruction. Intellectual instruction is not considered appropriate for the under-5s
- It is fundamental to the EYFS approach that the six areas of development – at least 2 of which focus largely or mainly on the ‘extending’ of cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy – are of equal value, and that children should be ‘progressed’ intellectually at as early an age as possible

Steiner believed children progress through three seven-year cycles of development: from birth to six, from seven to 14, and from 14 to 21. His aim was to help pupils achieve clarity of thought, sensitivity of feeling and strength of will by creating an educational framework to address each developmental stage in the most appropriate way.

The key principle of the Steiner approach - not forcing formal learning too early - is borne out of a desire to protect children's developing faculties of feeling and willing, which practitioners warn can be marginalised in the rush to achieve early intellectual attainment targets. The Steiner early years curriculum is driven by the view that in the first cycle of development children undergo the greatest physical growth and development, during which structures in the brain are being refined and elaborated. At this stage, they learn by doing, experiencing, touching and imitating. Not until the age of six are they physically, emotionally and intellectually ready for instruction.

The approach of the EYFS has been defended by a Department for Children, Schools and Families spokesman thus: "We want all children to make progress in literacy and numeracy at an early age, as these skills are critical to their ability to get the most out of learning later on.<sup>1</sup>" This approach is not

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<sup>1</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7107798.stm>

compatible with a philosophy which insists that all young (pre-school) children should make cognitive progress at their own pace, and that many will not be ready for progress in areas of the intellect such as literacy and numeracy until after the age of 5 (in some cases, considerably after).

The EYFS document<sup>2</sup> makes it clear that the expectation is for teachers to progress children towards the early learning goals, many of which are of an intellectual nature, and that these goals are seen as appropriate developmental milestones. The Steiner early years approach does not consider many of these goals to be appropriate developmental milestones for children of such a young age.

A system whereby children who are not granted exemptions will be steered towards these milestones, while children who are granted exemptions will not, would be extremely difficult to manage; indeed, it is our contention that it would be impossible to manage, as the following sections will show.

### **Differences regarding the nature of play:**

Both Steiner Waldorf early years practice and the EYFS claim the idea of play as central to their philosophies. However, the conception of play enshrined in the EYFS is so different to that of the Steiner concept as to be mutually exclusive:

- According to the EYFS, learning “must be delivered through planned, purposeful play, with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities<sup>3</sup>.”
- According to the Steiner philosophy, play is spontaneous and comes from within. The idea of planned, adult-led play is oxymoronic.

Therefore, the Steiner curriculum cannot be delivered through planned, adult-led play – the Steiner philosophy does not even recognise the possibility of such a concept (as outlined above). Further, while clearly the EYFS expects adults to lead play (note the distinction between “adult-led” and “child-initiated”; it appears that “child-led” is not necessarily an option), the Steiner philosophy is that adults should not intervene in play unless requested by the child or children.

It is clear, then, that delivery of the learning and development requirements of the EYFS as required by the Childcare Act 2006 is inconsistent with the delivery of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum in line with Steiner Waldorf philosophies. This being so, individual exemptions will only address the issue of parents’ rights to have their children educated in accordance with their own

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/eyfs/site/requirements/learning/goals.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/eyfs/site/requirements/learning/index.htm>

beliefs, as guaranteed by Article 2, First Protocol of the Human Rights Act 1998, if it is possible for the two systems – EYFS and Steiner – to run alongside one another in the same setting.

The following scenario will demonstrate that it is not:

Two children are playing together, as they do every day. One – child S - has been granted an exemption from the learning and development requirements of the EYFS on the grounds of her parents' educational philosophies (which align with Steiner Waldorf philosophies), and the other – child E - has not. When the teacher sees an opportunity to extend child E's competence in beginning to read and write, as statutorily required by the EYFS, what should she<sup>4</sup> do? If she never intervenes to extend Child E's competence, she has failed to comply with her duties towards child E under the law. If she does, she has compromised the right of child S's parents to have their child educated in accordance with their philosophies. There is no way for her to satisfy both the legal requirements of the EYFS and the legal rights of Child S's parents, except to segregate the children, which is likewise inconsistent with the Steiner Waldorf approach to play and would therefore violate the rights of child S's parents.

#### **Differences regarding the role of the teacher:**

- The EYFS approach clearly sees the early years teacher (or childminder, or playgroup leader) as a provider of learning – one whose role is to 'support and extend' the child's competences.
- The Steiner approach sees the kindergarten teacher as nurturer, carer and provider of a safe environment in which learning can take place at the child's own pace. The notion of the teacher 'extending' the child is alien to the Steiner early years philosophy. Extending and providing learning are seen in the Steiner system as appropriate only in lower and upper school, not in kindergarten where the right of the child to learn through exploration and true play in a safe and supportive environment is paramount.

In a kindergarten where some children are exempt from the learning and development requirements and others are not, the teacher will have to take on two roles simultaneously when dealing with a single group of children. There is some overlap between these roles, but – as the example of children E and S, above, demonstrates - to attempt to perform both at once would cause insoluble problems.

#### **Differences in beliefs regarding role and form of assessment:**

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<sup>4</sup> References to the feminine also infer the masculine

- The Steiner early years philosophy is a holistic one. In keeping with this, assessment comes from the teacher's knowledge of and relationship with the child, much as a parent's assessment of their child does. The teacher is looking for individual development and maturation of the child's own personality and abilities rather than 'progress' along a scale against particular norms.
- The EYFS requires that the teacher assesses according to 13 scales of 9 points each which focus on 'progress' and 'achievements'. While the DCSF suggests that these scales represent where a 'normal' child should be at the end of the EYFS, the validity of these norms is not universally agreed.

For the Steiner teacher to assess children according to the EYFS profile would change the relationship of the teacher towards the child. It is hard to see how the teacher could realistically be expected to operate in two modes towards two different groups of children in the same class without in some way disadvantaging one group.

#### **Differences regarding the understanding of 'progress':**

- The Steiner kindergarten teacher is looking for evidence that a child is developing as a person, and recognises that such evidence will be different for each child and will depend in part on where the child has started from
- The EYFS gives teachers a list of fixed assessment criteria to mark off as 'achieved'. The assumption is that the more of these criteria have been ticked, and the further up the scale the ticks go, the more progress has been made

While the EYFS document claims to recognise the individuality of each young child, it seeks to have 'most' achieving the same goals by the same age, and expects teachers to promote this aim. The Steiner system does not expect particular achievements from children by a particular age; the aim instead is that the teacher grows to know the child, and from this knowledge and relationship comes the teacher's judgement of whether the child is ready to move on to the next stage or to have particular expectations set. It is asking too much of any teacher to apply these two separate and in some ways opposing understandings of progress depending on whether or not an exemption has been granted.

#### **Differences in beliefs regarding the role of the state in education:**

There are many parents who send their children to a Steiner school precisely or partly because they do not believe it is the role of the state to prescribe educational practice or dogma. If even one child in the class is taught and

assessed according to the EYFS, the right of those parents to have their children educated in a classroom free from political interference is compromised.

**Likely negative outcomes of forcing EYFS thinking on Steiner kindergartens:**

There is a systemic relationship between the purpose of education (what we are here to do), measures or assessment (how we know how we are doing) and method (how we do it or teach). The EYFS takes a typically command and control thinking approach to the measurement of achievement of purpose by focusing on outcomes rather than the process. These measures not only obscure the means for improvement, they create 'de facto' purposes: be seen to be using the guidance cards (i.e adopt a pre determined curriculum) and push your children to attain as much as possible to avoid being bottom of the table<sup>5</sup>. At a stroke the teacher's and Early Years setting's ingenuity is focused on how to survive an inspection and the purpose of the education becomes lost .It is dysfunctional and at best limits the progress of children to develop holistically and at worst causes stress and will create difficulties for the child to cope and succeed in later schooling<sup>6</sup>.

The EYFS learning goals and assessment framework effectively imposes attainment standards on teachers and children. However, the whole idea of standards and targets is flawed. Their use will in this case only engage teachers' ingenuity in managing the numbers instead of improving their methods. Their attention will turn to being seen to meet the targets – fulfilling the bureaucratic requirements of reporting that which they have become 'accountable' for at the expense of achieving the original purpose. This will be true not only in a Steiner Early Years setting but in every other Early Years setting too.

Recent research has suggested that alternative approaches including Steiner Waldorf Education produce better academic success in the long term. Without a whole setting exemption this success is likely to be eroded and compromised as the full benefits of the educational approach are lost or subsumed. Individual exemptions will not on their own ensure that any EY setting will not have to pay some credence to the learning and assessment goals of the EYFS.

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<sup>5</sup> It is likely, given recent history, that at some point the assessments will eventually be used in some way to grade early years settings

<sup>6</sup> There is growing evidence that the focus on assessment has had these effects on both primary and secondary schools and on the children in their care