

Finding the Right School for your Child can be an Education in Itself

By Sue Eckstein

At this time of year, many parents will be thinking about their children's education. They may be relieved that they have got in to the school of their choice for September, or perhaps beginning the stressful appeals process. They may be wondering if their second choice of school is the right one for their child. But what do you do if it is not the school your child is attending, or about to attend, that you are not happy with, but the education system itself?

The National Curriculum, with its prescriptive literacy and numeracy hours, its compulsory testing, its lack of emphasis on art, music, handwork and drama, its relentless targets and resulting pressures on teachers, is not a system that can possibly suit all children. For every child it does suit, there might be just as many for whom it is an intensely negative and damaging experience.

My daughter sailed through her high-achieving primary school. She learnt her spellings, her tables, how to label the parts of a broad bean. She sat quietly on the carpet during literacy hour and, quite voluntarily, did beautiful pieces of homework. I disapproved of Sats, not quite enough to keep her out of school during the week of testing in Year Two, but enough not to open the envelope with the results. I merely glanced at the league tables to see the school retain its position at the top.

My son is three years younger than his sister. He followed her to the same school, intensely curious, highly articulate and very enthusiastic. At first I didn't notice that the system wasn't working for him. He didn't find phonics at all jolly. He seemed unable to sit cross-legged on the carpet for more than a couple of minutes at a time. By Year Two, his teacher expressed some surprise that reading had not suddenly "clicked" for him as she'd thought it would. I glimpsed at his Key Stage One Sats results which forecast a gloomy outcome at Key Stage Two. By Year Three, he had mastered the art of invisibility in the literacy and numeracy hours. Homework had become a battleground which usually ended in tears – mine if not his. He was put with the group of children referred to as "less able." His teacher used the term "bright" to describe the children who were meeting all the targets, and faltered when trying to find a word to describe those who were not.

I began to despair at the effect the education system was having on him and his friends on the "remedial table." I didn't care whether, at seven, my son could spell onomatopoeia, or recite his four times table, but I did want him to become visible in a group again, to have confidence in himself and all his many abilities, none of which would ever be reflected in the tests that he would continue to be subjected to, and continue to fail. I wanted him to be excited by learning, and not just by the prospect of the school holidays.

I had heard that there was a Steiner school in Brighton, but beyond knowing that it was somewhere near Kemp Town and that it followed some kind of alternative curriculum, I

knew little else about it. Many of my friends and acquaintances expressed surprise, or even concern, that we were even *considering* such an alternative path. Steiner School myths abound: “Isn’t it full of hippies?” “I’ve heard that children can just play in the sandpit all day if they choose to.” “You do know that it’s compulsory for parents to clean the school?” “Your son will never be able to fit back into mainstream education.” “They do some kind of weird dancing instead of proper sports like football!” “Isn’t the school just full of problem children who can’t cope with mainstream education?” “If they don’t test the children, how will you be able to tell if they are learning anything?” “The seven-year-olds can’t even read!”

Thankfully, all these misconceptions proved to be very far from the truth! But initially we did wonder what we were getting into. My husband and I both had very conventional educations – mine at a girls’ direct grant school, his at a Catholic boys’ boarding school. We work in fairly conventional environments – in higher education and the voluntary sector. It was a big step for all of us to consider Steiner education.

Now, after a term and a half at the school, we are so relieved we made the decision to move our son into the Steiner School. The Steiner curriculum is imaginative and wide-ranging. Our eight-year-old son’s week includes French, German, handwork, art, music, eurhythmics and religion as well as the main lesson in the morning in which maths and literacy are covered as part of whatever theme they are working on. In future years, he will be taught physics, geography, astronomy, history, classics, to name but a few of the subjects covered. In the upper school, he will be able to take GCSEs (last year’s results were well above the national average despite the absence of punishing testing schedules) while continuing to follow the Steiner Curriculum. He has friends from a very diverse range of backgrounds, some whose parents embrace an alternative lifestyle, others whose parents are teachers, actors, lawyers, plumbers or business people. No longer treated as a child who is not meeting targets, his confidence has grown and he comes home chatting excitedly about what he has learnt. Interestingly, having left his primary school in Year 3 barely able to read and hating the reading he was forced to do, he is now a competent and enthusiastic reader.

Our daughter is still thriving in mainstream education. We are thankful that we have had the opportunity of finding an environment in which our son can also thrive.