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A new school of thought for your child?



Suzanne Corrywright teaching yoga to sixth-formers at the Sheldon School, Chippenham, in Wiltshire Ben Gurr for The Times

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Alternative schools are enjoying a renaissance — but what sort of education do they offer?

Yoga, meditation, gardening and learning through play — not your traditional school fare. But “alternative” education has never been a hotter topic for many parents in Britain. Tired of a diet of uniforms and exams that many schools seem to offer, increasing numbers of parents are seeking more “enlightened” and less restrictive schools for their children.

The news that the Government has funded a number of alternative schools as “free schools” and is intending to give money to many more means that being wised-up is crucial. Many disparate types of school get lumped under the heading “alternative” but in reality they are different from each other.

Perhaps the best known alternative schools are the Montessori; there are thousands of private early-years Montessori establishments in the UK, but since the name is not trademarked, anyone can set up a Montessori school.

Louise Livingston, a Montessori teacher-trainer at the Maria Montessori Institute in Hampstead, northwest London, says that it’s important parents know the basics about this approach so that they can see when a school is following its principles. The scientist and educationalist Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the founder of these schools, felt it was vital that a teacher didn’t instruct children but helped them to develop their curiosity and imagination.

Children learn at their own pace and are not forced into activities that they don’t want to do; they learn by handling the “real” objects before them — whether it’s glasses, knives, sand or mobile phones. Toys are out and nurturing “fantasies”, such as role playing, is discouraged. The layout of a classroom is vital; with objects being set out depending upon the topic. While pupils may learn to read at an early age, depending on their interest, they often learn at the age of 6 by exploring letter sounds before reading books.

Some parents have problems with the Montessori approach because children appear to have too much independence and to develop slowly. The “directed” lessons in most state schools, with literacy and numeracy hours, do not happen. Children are not trained to pass tests and are never “pushed” to learn lots of “content”. Rote-learning of times tables and spellings is forbidden.

Some critics of the system raise other points: Valerie Polakow’s book *The Erosion of Childhood* offers a scathing critique of the Montessori method, suggesting that the schools impose an “adult-defined work ethic on children” and encourage children to be “isolated” from others — because children mostly work by themselves.

Steiner schools often get confused with Montessori schools, but are quite different. Steiner-Waldorf schools are based on the educational philosophy of the Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). While they have an aversion to uniforms and exams, Steiner was a mystic who believed in reincarnation and “spiritual evolution”. In common with many thinkers of the time, he held racist views, claiming that black people were “of childhood” and Asians were “degenerate”. But he held some progressive ideas about how children learn, believing they should develop their imaginative skills by handling “natural” materials.

Like Montessori, he believed children should learn through play, setting down distinct phases of learning. He felt, for example, that children shouldn't read fully until they are 7. When letters are first introduced, children are taught them in ways such as walking their shapes, a technique called eurhythmy.

Emma Craigie, a parent and Steiner school adviser, sent her four children to the private Meadow Steiner School in Bruton, Somerset. "After finding the local primary difficult to cope with, my daughter regained her zest for learning when we moved her to Meadow," she says. "My husband and I felt there was a really good understanding of the energy of children and of their interests. We sent our other children there and they've all benefited."

I have, however, spoken to a number of former Steiner parents and pupils who have encountered problems.

Some have raised concerns that Steiner schools have discouraged vaccinations because Steiner believed that the body should develop immunity naturally. While the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) claims that the organisation is not anti-vaccination per se, there's some evidence that a disproportionate number of Steiner school children are not vaccinated. A US survey reported in 2008 that some Steiner schools had between 70 to 80 per cent of children unvaccinated. The UK Health Protection Agency considers Steiner pupils to be members of the unvaccinated community.

David Colquhoun, Professor of Pharmacology at University College London, says: "The statement does not support vaccinations and says only that opposition to vaccination is not a part of their 'specific educational objectives', omitting Steiner's belief that if children are vaccinated they will need a 'spiritual education', which means that children should be properly inducted into 'Anthroposophy'. This is an occult philosophy that shapes the pedagogy in Steiner schools and talks of karma, reincarnation, spiritual evolution and all sorts. It can't be taken seriously."

On the surface, you might think that the most far-out alternative education would be found at the Maharishi School, in Lathom, Lancashire, which will become a state school in September. Based on the philosophy of the Maharishi Yogi, the Indian guru connected with the Beatles, it teaches all its pupils transcendental meditation.

Its head teacher, Derek Cassells says: "Pupils meditate three times a day, using the transcendental meditation technique, before school, before lunch and at the end of school. This approach systematically develops their creativity and intelligence. This not only helps their behaviour and attitude in school, but also their enjoyment of life outside."

Colquhoun, though, has doubts that TM has any real health benefits. "It's a mystical

technique that is not proven in any scientific sense to improve the wellbeing of the meditator,” he says. “I worry that by doing it children are learning to believe that TM is effective and not think critically about it.”

However, unlike Steiner and Montessori schools, it is much like traditional schools — pupils wear uniforms, take exams such as GCSEs and are taught in the “directed” way of many state schools. Cassells points out that the use of TM could be adopted by any school without any other changes to the curriculum. His school has worked with state schools in helping them to teach pupils to meditate.

Suzanne Corrywright has been teaching yoga at the Sheldon School, Chippenham, Wiltshire, for the past eight years because pupils have enjoyed it so much. “Many children at school still like to lie back in the grass and stare at the clouds but they feel that this isn’t really allowed any more,” she says.

“I find that when they do yoga, they realise that this sort of daydreaming and relaxation is permitted. It’s the moments of total relaxation after pupils have done all the breathing and body posture exercises that children most value.

Pupils’ attitudes to school — and to their life — change when they’ve done yoga for a while; their behaviour and concentration really improves. This helps everyone, including long-suffering teachers and parents.”

It’s clear that many alternative approaches could be integrated into state schools if parents successfully lobbied head teachers. Even the sceptical David Colquhoun felt that there was no harm with children doing a little yoga and meditation in school as an extra. “It’s only when you base a whole school or educational philosophy around mystical ideas that the problems happen,” he says.

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