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A pleasurable path to literacy: Can Steiner contribute to the literacy debate?

JOHN BURNETT University of Plymouth, UK

Abstract Although the recent publication of the Rose Report appears to draw a line in the sand that privileges synthetic phonics over other methods in the UK, history indicates a pendulum swing of preference between whole-word and phonics since the advent of mass education. Suggesting that the current ‘victory’ for exponents of synthetic phonics is merely a temporary cessation of hostilities in long-standing ‘Reading Wars’, this article introduces the idea that Steiner Waldorf teaching has, for generations, offered an approach to literacy that has consistently encompassed both phonics and ‘whole-word’ teaching, combining this with a traditional ‘spelling’ method. It outlines an approach in which emergent writing derived from speaking and listening provides an essentially meaningful initial activity for young children, offering them a pleasurable and easy pathway to reading and literacy. The article looks at innovative interpretations of Steiner’s original indications regarding the teaching of writing and reading and recommends systematic research into existing practice in Steiner Schools.

Keywords emergent writing; Reading Wars; Steiner Waldorf Education; synthetic phonics; ‘whole-word’

The recent publication of the Rose Report (Rose, 2006), leaving synthetic phonics privileged over other methods of teaching reading and writing in the UK, has, according to Diana Hofkins (2006a), ‘tried to bring a resolution to the phonics war’. Far from this event being the definitive moment in the history of UK Education, as some exponents of phonics would claim, the report could be seen as merely one small event taking place in ‘Reading Wars’ (Reyhner, 2003), which have been raging in the English-speaking world as far back as the beginning of the mass education movement early in the 19th Century. Tracing the origins of the ‘whole-word’ approach as far back as Rousseau, James Lee (1998), a traditionalist exponent of the

phonics method, castigates 'the progressive view of education which has inflicted such horrendous damage upon the literacy of America'. Citing Horace Mann's claims, as early as 1863, that whole word methods would 'eliminate the drudgery and tyranny of the alphabetic method', Lee (1998: 1) describes a battle of 1841 where, 'a group of Boston schoolmasters produced an incisive, book-length critique of the "look-say" method and won a year-long battle with the State Board, allowing them to return to the alphabetical-phonetic method'. According to Lee, however, 'the seeds of "look-and-say" were carefully nurtured by Mann and his followers in the teacher-training colleges. When resistance had waned and as these "traditionalist" schoolmasters retired, they were replaced by the thoroughly indoctrinated products of Mann's teachers colleges'.

Considering the many conflicts over the teaching of literacy that have run their course in the UK and other English-speaking countries such as the USA, it is unlikely that the Rose Report will be viewed as an all-time definition as to how children should approach literacy. The report's recommendation that young children should be 'making a good start on systematic phonic work by the age of five' so they can 'benefit from the wealth of opportunities afforded by reading from an early age', draws a clear line in the sand in favour of synthetic phonics and appears to consign to history the failed efforts of its opponents. Rose may herald the dawn of a new, enlightened era in the teaching of literacy but cynical readers might characterize the report as little more than a battlefield dispatch from one of many campaigns fought over decades.

So, is there anything new under the sun? Will the current victory for exponents of phonics be undermined by future revivals of whole-word teaching methods in the pendulum swing of history? This article suggests the Steiner Waldorf approach to teaching literacy (Clouder and Rawson, 2000) might have a contribution to make to 'post-reading-wars' debate,¹ particularly in a climate where synthetic phonics is currently dominant. It describes a long-standing approach that has always encompassed phonics and 'whole-word' approaches, combining these with traditional 'spelling' methods. The article also introduces the idea that young children's meeting with letters and words can be a particularly enjoyable and meaningful experience when they begin with writing derived from their own speaking and listening. Such ideas have, of course, been championed by others for decades but it may be appropriate that they can be given voice by Steiner as a balance to what some consider a one-sided advocacy of phonics and an emphasis on early *reading*.

The article claims that this approach offers a pleasurable, non-stressful and effective pathway to literacy where children learn to love language and

use its powers creatively. It looks at innovative interpretations of Steiner's original indications regarding initial teaching of writing and reading, acknowledging the need for systematic research into the effectiveness of the methods used by teachers in UK Steiner schools.

As an educator, Steiner was a post-First World War reformer. His ideas, developed between 1910 and 1919, appealed to young teachers longing to bring something new into the wreckage of a war-torn Europe. He advocated the development of a pedagogy that would reflect the needs of the time, replacing classical models of education that had largely served and perpetuated the culture of a literate ruling elite who had exclusive access to culture. For Steiner, the classical approach had validity in the social systems of the Middle Ages, Rome and Ancient Greece but was becoming increasingly inappropriate for meeting the educational needs of the urban, mass population of an industrialized society. His response was to open a school for factory workers' children in Stuttgart and develop a pedagogy in which children of all abilities and from all backgrounds were entitled to time to learn with the joy of self-discovery.

Lecturing in 1923 to teachers interested in the Waldorf School he had established four years earlier, Steiner (1988: 80) advocated an integrated approach to the teaching of literacy, embodying a combination of whole-word (analytic); phonetic; and 'spelling' methods. One of the distinctive aspects of Steiner's approach is the importance he gives to the pupil thoroughly drawing, painting and writing letter forms at the initial stage of acquiring literacy skills. Children in Steiner schools form initial letters with great care, developing and practising the forms from pictures made up by the class teacher that 'lead the child to an appreciation of a wholeness and prevent it from becoming too fixed in details'. According to Steiner 'the single sound by itself, the separate "M" or "P" represent a reality'. Sounds are not viewed as mere building blocks for constructing words and sentences but are experienced as entities that have distinct qualities and generate deep feeling responses in the listening human being.

For Steiner, letters and writing had their origins in the pictorial consciousness of earlier times, a consciousness in which myth and image were still reflective of archetypal realities (Campbell, 1974). Speaking in England in 1924, five years after the founding of the first Waldorf school, he exhorted teachers to work with the naturally imaginative consciousness of the young child by freely devising pictures that would enliven children's initial experience of letters and would 'lead the children in a vivid and imaginative way through the various stages which man himself has passed through in the history of civilisation' (Steiner, 1995: 37). Believing that

such an approach re-enlivens letter symbols that would otherwise remain mere abstract conventions, Steiner observes that:

The calligraphy of today is quite foreign to the child whether in the written or printed letters. He has no relation whatever to this thing which is called an 'A'. Why should he be interested in an 'L'? These are quite foreign to him, this 'A', this 'L'. Nevertheless when the child comes to school we take him into the classroom and start to teach him these things. The result is that he feels no contact with what he has to do. (Steiner, 1995: 36)

'Making a good start' in literacy was, for Steiner, a matter of making the activity of writing and reading accessible and relevant to the child at a deep level. To achieve this, the child's initial experience of a letter should reflect something of the oral-pictorial character of its origin and should arise out of the child's own artistic activity. Giving an example as to how a group of teachers could link sound and picture image in this way, he suggests they:

. . . take the word 'fish'. Let the child draw or paint some kind of fish. Let him say the beginning of the word: 'F' and you can gradually get the F out of the drawing. (Steiner, 1995: 37)

A teacher following Steiner's suggestions would seek carefully for an image where initial sound and pictorial form are integral. A bear lumbering forward with outstretched paws; the billowing sails of a boat or the folded wings of a butterfly all provide pictures that can be drawn and painted, out of which the child can 'gradually get' a capital 'B'. The shape of the butterfly, the sound 'b' we make when we say the word, the story out of which the image has been drawn are all meaningfully linked in the child's experience. For Steiner, sound, symbol and image have to be a unity; the children's experience of this totality has to be grounded in human speech if the attendant learning is to be meaningful and 'lifelong'. For Steiner, language and its representation in writing, cannot be meaningfully constructed out of 'bits' like pieces of a Lego in a kit. Sounds and words are 'what we have in our soul' and 'need to be introduced with a certain pedagogical skill and artistry' (Steiner, 1995: 37).

Through producing their own emergent writing and analysing the text they have drawn through the teacher's guidance, the children's first experience in this realm can be one of secure ownership as they are drawing on their naturally acquired powers of speech – something they have been learning instinctively from the time they were toddlers. Most six-year olds have a vast range of syntax, semantics and an extensive vocabulary and can delight in putting written sentences together as soon as they are able to form a few consonants and vowels. The emergent texts they produce can be

deeply meaningful and rich in language if modelled and guided by a sympathetic teacher.

At first sight, Steiner's approach to teaching sound-symbols looks similar to the popular *Letterland* (2006) system with its images of 'Harry Hat Man', 'Bouncy Ben' or 'Eddy Elephant'. Both approaches provide pictorial-oral prompts to aid children in recognizing and engaging with unfamiliar letter forms and aim at making the learning of letters enjoyable and memorable. At a deeper level, however, despite both systems using imaginative pictures, there are fundamental differences. The 'B' in 'Ben' and 'bouncy' and the 'E' in 'Eddy' and 'elephant' are introduced primarily as mnemonics whereas Steiner's letter-pictures are chosen so that form and sound and picture are, essentially, integrated and offer an experience of wholeness.

In Steiner pedagogy, the principle of starting from unity applies to the making of words and sentences as well as with introducing letters and sounds. Once the children are comfortable and familiar with the sound-pictorial representation of a handful of consonants and a couple of vowels, they begin to recognize the way older people use these to 'put what we speak onto paper'. By far the most meaningful way of practising this is for the child to be supported in producing their own simple emergent writing based on speech. David Smith, an experienced Waldorf class-teacher, describes how his class of six-year olds wrote their first sentence, having learnt seven letters and a couple of vowels (Smith, 2003). The sentence, from a story they knew, was, 'The giant had a big bag'. The class decide, collectively, to write 'BAG' and ask, 'What sounds are in this?' Identifying the last sound, they omit this, concentrating on the initial sound, 'BA'. By saying this to themselves once or twice they identify 'B' and then the vowel, 'A'. They now can put this together in writing the first part of 'BAG' because the pictorial form of 'B' is a little bow shooting arrows and they also have a pictorial gesture for the sound 'A', which is on the wall as a reminder. Having written 'BA' they remember the original sentence and the word 'BAG', asking,

What sound is this last one? BA . . . G, so it's 'G'. Look at the seven letters on the wall. They are the beginnings of pictures. Which is 'G' the beginning of? Goose, of course! So draw the beginning of a goose (a G with a little head and beak) and now we have formed the writing of BAG, just as we formed the sound with our mouth. (Smith, 2003: 9)

Smith emphasizes that the children are not 'blending' sounds together so much as always going back to the whole and analysing different sounds out. He argues for 'analysing sounds in the way natural to becoming conscious of one's speech'; in this sense, segmenting a word into 'BA . . .

G' is much more helpful for children than 'B . . . AG', which prompts the children to say 'BU . . . AG', adding a confusing artificial vowel sound.

Smith makes a persuasive case for children using guided emergent writing combined with an analytical approach to natural speech as a bridge to reading and describes how two-thirds of his class of 6–7-year olds were making rapid progress through simple reading schemes only three months after their first introduction to analysing words and letters. According to Smith, 'any major steps in reading ability were usually taken in writing, beforehand'. The gist of this approach, closely in accord with Steiner's original indications is to:

. . . recognise how the child becomes conscious in a simple and direct way of something he can do, that he can already do. From this awareness the child can do something similar.

Smith's innovative and thoughtful approach to the initial teaching of literacy provides stimulating material for Steiner Waldorf practitioners in its fresh interpretation of Steiner's indications regarding literacy. Describing, 'how excited and enlivened (his) class one children were when they quickly learned how writing works' and how they 'started writing little words within two weeks of being introduced to letters for the first time', his paper suggests the 'relative ease and great value of learning to read through writing'. Essentially, Smith sees such writing as a bridge to reading where children begin with natural speech and learn to segment it into its constituent sounds. He acknowledges the need for more extensive research in the field and points the way to a reappraisal of Steiner's original indications regarding initial teaching of writing and reading. Failure to fully realize what Steiner was indicating, comments Smith, can lead to situations where 'writing is the plodding work of copying a piece off the board, perhaps known by heart and where the teacher is unsure what each child could manage out of themselves'.

What would a visitor see if they visited a contemporary Steiner school and sought out a literacy lesson with small children? They would almost certainly experience a daily period led by the class teacher with time devoted to speaking and listening, to forming letters and to using these letters in emergent writing. They would experience the class taking their first steps in reading handwritten texts produced by their own efforts. They would see the children reading text produced by individual children, by the whole group and by the teacher who would be modelling skilled writing on the basis of group conversations about letter-forms and their sound correspondences. The following passage presents one or two pictures of practice in a typical Steiner literacy lesson.

A focus of the classroom is a chalkboard on which have been drawn beautifully coloured pictures showing bears, geese, valleys, waves and houses. On the wall are further pictures showing the letters derived from the pictures. The teacher has worked hard to draw these pictures by hand and to make them friendly and fun. In their first weeks at school, the children were introduced to the letters, day by day, as characters in stories told by the teacher. They now know them as friends for they have drawn them on large sheets of paper with thick wax crayons; they have modelled them in plasticine or dough, marched their shapes around the classroom and drawn them on the floor with pencils held between their toes. Guided by the teacher, they experience these letters as dynamic shapes with which they have engaged physically and tactilely as well as cognitively. For the first few months, capital 'B' keeps his furry ears to remind the children how he first appeared as a bear in the story of Snow White and Rose Red. Capital 'G', which is coloured gold, has an eye and a goose's beak whilst 'C' has whiskers and long tail. As the children continue using the letters, these homely details disappear and the capitals they were first introduced to become joined by their low-case cousins. As their picture-sound vocabulary extends and they can reproduce more and more symbols from memory, the children's capacity for writing and reading grows.

The daily lesson normally begins with singing and clapping and rhythmic exercises involving balls and bean bags. The desks and tables have been pushed to the side of the room to make a movement space and the children and teacher work hard on this 'warm-up' time. After a while the teacher leads the children into recitation. There are tongue-twisters and little verbal exercises where the children make word-play with the sounds they have learnt to represent in images and symbols: 'round and round the rugged rock . . .'; 'red lorry-yellow lorry'; 'a tutor who tooted the flute' – old chestnuts that tune the ear and provide gymnastics for lips and teeth and palate. On this occasion, the class move on to practise a poem that they can already partly recite in unison from memory. It's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' by Robert Frost and the children, delighting in the falling cadence of the final stanza, recite:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
 But I have promises to keep
 And miles to go before I sleep
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Noticing how the children enjoy these final lines and already know them by heart, the teacher decides to draw on this in tomorrow's work. Next morning, as the children come into the classroom, they notice on the chalk-

board the teacher's new pictorial rendering of a horse and a farmer on a snowy evening. Each day, the children have been engaged in some sort of writing activity, sometimes free, emergent writing, sometimes copying, sometimes writing guided by the teacher. The writing is usually linked to the picture on the board and on this occasion, the whole class have a pretty clear idea what's on the agenda. There's a spontaneous chorus when it comes to writing time as everyone has Frost's words on the tip of their tongues. Today, it's an 'auction' where the teacher stands before the board and asks, 'Who can guess what we're going to write today?'. A forest of hands shoot up and they're quite sure they're going to write the last bit of the poem. 'Today', says the teacher, 'we're going to write those words next to the picture and then I want you to copy them down in your books so carefully and beautifully that the Queen herself would put your books on display in Buckingham Palace. Now, who would like to suggest the first letters I should write to make up the first word?'. There's no shortage of volunteers for 'The' and 'woods' have a lot of takers. The word 'are' is not so easy and 'lovely' is a real challenge. On this occasion, the teacher is the scribe but, on other occasions, the children take the chalk and let the others dictate. A child offers 'wds' for 'woods'. 'No!' shouts out another voice, 'It's got two "o"s in the middle'. The class and teacher discuss and, finally, the correct spelling is placed on the board. The 'auction' continues. Everyone is encouraged to bid. There are lots of laughs when mistakes are made but the teacher steers the process until there is a text everyone has ownership of. 'Now, let's read it together', suggests the teacher. The whole class 'read' the text with gusto and then set to work laboriously copying, illustrating their writing with snow-clad trees, the patient horse and his poetic master.

Next day, the text remains on the board. This time, the teacher introduces some analytical games. The children having 'read' through the text a couple of times together, he says to the class, 'When I say, "Hide", I want you all to shut your eyes and put your faces on your desks – except for Lucy who is to come up to the board and carefully rub out a couple of letters from the poem. Then, when I say, "Look", I want you all to find which letter she has taken away'. They know the game and always enjoy it. Lucy rubs out 'm' in 'miles' and 'g' in 'go'. There is real tension as the children scan the text for the missing letters. Children readily volunteer to fill in the gaps and others are eager to be 'rubbers-out'. They are analysing and synthesizing with the same eagerness with which they would play snakes and ladders or some game of skill. As the week progresses, children in the class are confidently writing out new words from memory but are also able to construct their own words and little sentences from the graphemes and phonemes they are discovering in texts. Frost's poem has provided a medium out of

which new sounds and shapes can be discovered and practised; at the same time, it is experienced by the children and the teacher as a whole, a meaningful narrative that can speak to the full human being, whether they are 6 or 60.

The above passage does not describe a series of structured lessons involving sequenced teaching of phonemes and their grapheme correspondences. Rather, it shows a few moments in a process that takes place over years as the class-teacher leads the children into the world of writing out of the world of instinctive speech. Steiner class teachers stay with their classes for up to eight years and, during this time, they take the children in their care through a range of writing and reading experiences. Systematic record-keeping is, of course, an important part of this process, as is careful and consistent preparation but, essentially, the children's experience of the building blocks and innate structure of language has a good chance of being meaningful and pleasurable, derived as much as possible from actual speech and beautiful literature. There is no reason why Shakespeare, Frost and good contemporary poetry should not be part of the regular literary diet of small children. If they experience the beauty of the spoken word early in their time in school, there is every chance they will love words and the thoughts they convey when they arrive in adulthood.

Steiner recognized that the acquiring of literacy skills was necessary to be an active citizen of the modern age but advocated a phased, gradual approach building on secure foundations of spoken language. He saw the premature and forced introduction of abstract letter symbols as a destructive and potentially alienating experience for the small child, citing narratives of Native American Indians being shown printed writing when they first met Europeans. According to the description, they 'ran away from it because they thought the letters were little devils' (Steiner, 1995: 39). Anyone struggling to support an early reader disinterested or confused over letter forms and sounds can readily experience how letters and words can assume a stressful, demonic character for the child, leading to cumulative problems of academic self-esteem if the child continues to fail in his or her passage through school. The works of Lawrence (1973, 1985), Craske (1988) and Gurney (1987) all identify problems arising when children fail to connect meaningfully with literacy and cite issues of damaged self-esteem consequent on cumulative experience of failure. Chapman et al. (1990), looking at sociological factors that might affect children's disposition towards the experience of failure, conclude that academic self-concept is largely the result of reading achievement at school with minimal influence from the home environment.

Resisting the instrumentalism and elitism implicit in state-driven

learning programmes employing target-setting and league-tables (Kelly, 1995), modern-day Steiner Waldorf schools still aim to model good practice in an environment where learning is conceived of as essentially a meaningful and pleasurable activity. Their approach to initial literacy, fundamentally grounded in a 'writing before reading' method, has been consistent over decades of warring opinions as to how best children should be taught to read. There is clearly more work to be done on researching and improving Steiner Waldorf methodology, and a systematic examination of the schools' results since 1919 is long overdue but such an approach may be worth looking at more closely by teachers seeking a way of working with the whole child. In common with children in Montessori schools, the child in a Steiner Waldorf school is given time to learn out of the conviction that the development of intellectual capacities is best served by a gradual unfolding of memory and a belief that the faculty for manipulating abstract representations develops most effectively when allowed to emerge from the foundations of speech.

For Steiner (1996: 179), the instruction of reading and writing could be best achieved through art. Walking or running letter shapes, painting and drawing them, clapping, stamping and reciting rhythmic poems, all call on the child's active will and lay foundations for healthy initial learning in which the child's limbs as well as heart and lungs are energetically engaged. Only gradually, with such an approach, does the head awaken to intellectual understanding and the secure mastery of written language out of which fluency in reading can emerge. By denying, as it learns, the small child's natural delight in movement, poetic speech, singing and the activity of making pictures in a playful, free way, we run the risk of 'torturing the head aspect' (Steiner, 1996) until reading and writing become pressurized chores, subject to the demands of an ever-encroaching testing regime that raises 'standards' while killing the enthusiasm for language that all true educators would engender. Writing in the *Guardian*, Philip Pullman (2003) sounds a sombre and prophetic note, warning us of the consequences of embedding reading and writing in a too narrow performativity culture. If the path to literacy is not a pleasurable one, we run the real risk of 'losing the plot' in the unfolding narrative of what it means to teach children language. Once lost, the 'plot' will not be easy to recover with untold consequences for future generations. Pullman, himself an English teacher, expresses his concern that:

. . . in a constant search for things to test, we're forgetting the true purpose, the true nature, of reading and writing; and in forcing these things to happen in a way that divorces them from pleasure, we are creating a generation of children who might be able to make the right noises when they see print, but who hate reading and feel nothing but hostility for literature.

Notes

1. 'Waldorf' is the name generally used to describe Steiner schools in Germany and a number of other European countries. The first *Waldorf School*, founded in 1919, was funded by Emil Molt, the owner of the Waldorf Astoria cigar and cigarette factory in Stuttgart. It provided free education for the children of the factory workers and has served as the original model for what is now a world school movement with 894 schools in 74 different countries. In the UK, the name 'Steiner School' is frequently used but some institutions describe themselves as 'Waldorf Schools'. The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship and the European Council of Steiner Waldorf Schools have agreed that the standard descriptor will be 'Steiner Waldorf'.

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Correspondence to:

JOHN BURNETT, Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, Douglass Avenue, Exmouth EX8 2AT, UK. [email: j.burnett@plymouth.ac.uk]