

Joe Evans, who works as business manager at Steiner Academy Bristol, is exasperated by such claims. "I find that very frustrating, because nobody ever gets in touch with us and asks us anything," he says. "We're not at all anti-science."

He also maintains that the school doesn't deviate from teachings on evolution, although Steiner textbooks have criticised Darwinism.

"What we're about is the practical system of education, we're not here to uphold the literal truth of everything that Rudolf Steiner wrote," Mr Evans says. But if state Steiner schools

'Some dogmas attached to Steiner education belong to a 1950s era we're moving away from'

have moved so far from Rudolf Steiner's original vision, why is it still necessary to maintain any sort of association at all? The question has a particular poignancy today

because of Steiner's theory of a racial hierarchy, his references to the "totally passive negro soul" and his description of Native Americans as "a degenerated human race".

At a time when students at the University of Oxford are demanding the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes as a racist, colonialist symbol, how could the school explain this aspect of Steiner's theories to its multi-ethnic students?

Ms Browne, a London-born black woman, points out that in Bristol everyone lives with the evidence of colonialism and the slave trade all around them. She points out that the city has schools named after Edward Colston, a notable slave-trader who also founded several of Bristol's institutions.

She says of Steiner's theory: "I would be thrilled if a child asked that question, because it means that we can start engaging with them in that conversation, and that's exactly what we're here to do."

Sarah Costelloe, assistant head for curriculum and assessment, argues that state funding is allowing Steiner education to evolve. "One of the things that has possibly happened to Steiner education, partly due to a lack of resources, is that it has become a little bit stuck in a certain model," she says. "Because we've got this opportunity in terms of being state-funded, we're able to move forward with those ideas. I think some of the dogmas that are attached to Steiner education belong very much to a 1950s era of education that we're moving away from."

But there are many elements of Steiner education for which the only authority is in the founder's writings. What is the evidence for restricting students' access to technology until secondary age, for example?

"That data is only just being generated; what we're doing is very new," says Ms Costelloe. It's an odd thing to say for a system that is nearly a century old.

The academy is keen to demonstrate that it's not opposed to technology. Alongside the blackboards are digital projectors. Focusing the IT budget on secondary pupils means that it can afford to provide powerful laptops, which staff intend to use for everything from film editing to robotics – eventually. "We've got Macs," says 12-year-old Daniel Hoder. "But they haven't set them up yet."

It's obvious that the school is a work in progress. A large part of the Victorian Gothic site, once home to a teacher training college and now nicknamed "Hogwarts" by the students, is closed for renovation.

Making a school 'future-proof'

What is more unusual is that this new school is already planning against the possibility that a future government will try to change its character. Mr Evans calls it "future-proofing". "If a government comes in and says, 'This "no national curriculum for free schools" has to stop,' we can then say, 'OK, here it is,'" he says, outlining the school's plans for publishing a Steiner curriculum and assessment plan.

"We're not teaching it in the same order, but we deliver all the objectives and learning outcomes of the national curriculum. You can see we're not doing anything massively wacky."

Mr Evans anticipates lower results at key stage 2 because the school will not teach to the test; the school has already made that clear to the Department for Education.

But there are other areas where the academy has had to adjust to the pressures of the mainstream school system. Teachers are expected to gain qualifications in mainstream teaching as well as in Steiner education and have developed a formal system for assessing and tracking pupil progress.

Eurythmy, the expressive dance form used in the majority of Steiner schools, has been dropped here after students new to Steiner education were reluctant to engage in it. It may be replaced with tai chi.

And the academy is required to have a lone principal, instead of being run by a collective college of teachers, like in many other Steiner schools.

But Mr Evans says that he doesn't believe the Steiner vision has been diluted.

"We would see it as a success if in five years, we're walking around the school and hearing beautiful four-part harmonies coming out from choir lessons in class three and amazing pupil paintings everywhere," he says.

That's a vision that clearly attracts many parents, who say at open days that they want a school that is more "unstressed".

So while debate has focused around whether Steiner schools should be allowed in the state system, perhaps it's worth asking another question. Why shouldn't other schools have the choice to reduce external assessment in the way that Steiner academies can? ●

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RESEARCH

ROUND-UP

Second-career teachers 'frustrated'

Staff who have changed career to teach are often frustrated by the lack of recognition they receive from colleagues for the value their pre-teaching experience brings to the job.

Chris Wilkins and Chris Comber, of the University of Leicester, examined the experiences of 24 second-career teachers. Most of them said that their previous careers gave them skills of value in their new jobs. They reported frustration with the fact that their colleagues and school leaders did not acknowledge this input.

bit.ly/SecondCareer

Benefits of reading for pleasure

Young children who are strong readers are likely to make significant cognitive progress between the ages of 10 and 16, according to a large-scale longitudinal study.

Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown, of University College London's Institute of Education, studied the maths and vocabulary test scores of more than 3,500 16-year-olds. They found that children who read for pleasure tended to make substantial cognitive progress between the ages of 10 and 16. Reading was most strongly linked to progress in vocabulary, but had a link to maths progress. It was a stronger predictor of teenage academic progress than parents' levels of education.

bit.ly/ReadForPleasure

SEN pupils 'don't interact as much'

The amount of time that pupils in general spend interacting with their teachers and classmates has increased significantly over 35 years.

But the amount of time that children with special educational needs (SEN) spend with teachers has increased far less over the same period.

There has been almost no change in the amount of time SEN pupils spend interacting with their peers, according to Rob Webster, of University College London's Institute of Education.

Mr Webster, using data from studies between 1976 and 2012, argues that the difference between the experiences of children with SEN and those of their classmates could be down to the rise in teaching assistants hired to work with SEN pupils.

bit.ly/TeacherTime

Men 'don't want to teach infants'

Teaching older pupils is a more appropriate job for men than teaching infants, as it requires greater intellectual capacity and offers higher social status, according to a group of male trainee teachers.

The trainees in South Africa, interviewed by Deevia Bhana and Shaaista Moosa, of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, said that they viewed working with infants as feminised and unmasculine. The qualitative study revealed that these male teachers were also keen to emphasise their own power and masculinity.

bit.ly/MaleTeachersSA

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