Imagination, Wonder & Reverence: The Primary Years in Steiner / Waldorf Education

There are so many choices when it comes to schools: public, private, independent, homeschooling and unschooling. Tracey Puckeridge discusses the difference in the Steiner / Waldorf primary schools from mainstream schooling.

Why is Steiner / Waldorf education one of the fastest growing independent school movements in the world? There are over 40 Steiner schools in Australia, across every State and Territory, Steiner streams in government schools in three States and Steiner schools in more than 65 countries.

Steiner education encompasses early childhood, primary and high school years. A previous article on Steiner education in *Nurture* focused on the early childhood years. This article will consider the unique aspects of Steiner education in the primary years.

Wave after wave of education reform strives to keep up with the fast technological pace and growing expectations of the global economy. So how does Steiner education fit into the 21st century? What is the same and what is different to other forms of education? Although the first Waldorf (Steiner) School was opened in 1919, I believe the insights and pedagogical philosophy that Dr Rudolf Steiner gave educators in the early 20th century are even more important in our fast changing world.

There are many factors to be considered when developing a balanced primary educational program. All schools, whether Steiner or otherwise, must meet the Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) that promotes equity and excellence so that all learners have equal opportunity to be successful, become confident, creative individuals and active and informed citizens.

*What is similar between Steiner schools and other forms of primary schooling?*

All students should be given opportunities to:
- Gain breadth and depth of understanding with strong skills in all aspects of learning that develop intellectual, social-emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of the whole human being
- Have teachers that foster healthy relationships, as research highlights this is a key ingredient to quality education and excellent student outcomes

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- Learn in a supportive and positive social/emotional environment and receive excellent pastoral care
- Engage in a range of cultural experiences
- Be part of a vibrant school community where parents are encouraged to be engaged in their child’s learning
- Be able to learn at their own rate and supported in all aspects of school life

*How does the Steiner primary pedagogical approach differ?*

Steiner education sees the primary years as the optimal time for nurturing the child’s imagination. Dr Steiner stated, “this vital picture-making capacity ... gives life and insight to logical and conceptual thinking.” Curriculum content, cognitive development and skill building are approached through pictorial and imaginative activities. Subjects are taught in three week 2 hour learning blocks called Main Lessons where students can be totally immersed in the content and learn from a range of relevant learning experiences.

It is a significant task to be a Steiner teacher; you must know each subject so well that you can bring the curriculum in a creative, rich, imaginative way. Story telling is the springboard for the learning that takes place in these lesson blocks. The teacher tells a story every day for three weeks that not only represents the content, but truly engages the children’s imagination.

For example, in the younger years when introducing the four maths operations of multiplication, division, subtraction and addition, the teacher might create imaginative characters that portray the essence of these mathematical calculations. I will never forget the characters I created that lived with the children from Class 1 and continued right into Class 3 and were even sometimes mentioned by the children in Class 4: the Magic Multiplier, who could magically create multiple groups of the same number; Divine Divide, who was only interested...
in giving everyone equal shares, Portly Plus, who revelled in collecting more and more; and Sabrina Subtract, who not only loved to give things away but was constantly losing things from the hole in her pocket! These characters had many adventures, leaving the children open mouthed in wonder and eagerly seeking the next day's story. When doing their bookwork, these abstract mathematical symbols became alive for the students and sitting on the mat with counters and numeracy tasks to complete, their learning was real and relevant.

Each Main Lesson may include games, speech, music, singing and physical activity, all related to the academic content, engaging students with a variety of learning styles. Students represent their knowledge and understanding through many forms such as bookwork, creative writing, drawing, painting, music, drama and movement.

The development of these imaginative capacities enables students to connect with the academic material and forms the foundation for future creativity, problem solving and innovation. The Steiner curriculum is matched year by year to the developmental needs of the children and every Main Lesson is designed by the Class Teacher to meet the needs of every child in their class.

The Class Teacher period forms the backbone of the Primary years in Steiner schools. After the early childhood years, in the year the children turn seven, they move into Class 1 with their teacher that will take them on their primary years journey. It is such an honour, responsibility and privilege to accept a group of children into your care and know that you are responsible for their education until they go to high school. The bonds that are built between teacher and students, teacher and families, and students in the class is extremely strong. The students in my first class group that I journeyed with throughout their primary years are now 23, I still keep in touch with many of them and more importantly, they also keep in touch with each other and support each other in many ways. It is a life long bond. My second class group are now 16 and I see them whenever I can.

The benefits of the Class Teacher period are many. The teacher comes to know each child very well, understanding their social habits, interests, attitude, temperament, work habits, family life, skills and abilities, strengths and weaknesses.

The children want to do their best and the teacher, through careful observation, understands what each individual child needs; when to push, when to back off, when to seek alternate support. The College of Teachers in the school also work with each Class Teacher, supporting them with advice, sharing ideas and concerns.

It is important in any school for the parents to work alongside the teacher, to uphold the school ethos, policies and provide support to the teacher in order to benefit their child. In life, we all have to learn how to get along with others. In adult

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Children can be anything when they grow up. It all depends on how they learn while growing up. Just ask Chahaya Gauci. He attended Casuarina Steiner School and went on to graduate as a doctor, now working at St. George's Hospital, Sydney.

'I am incredibly thankful to my Steiner education for the experience, personal strengths, values & knowledge I was encouraged to develop.'

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life we are always confronted with people that we find difficult, therefore learning important social skills from a young age is a significant advantage in adult life. Being a class family for the primary years certainly means you have to work through issues and challenges and find good communication strategies.

Having the same teacher throughout the primary years provides for smooth transitions. Every Christmas break the Class Teacher plans the lessons for their class for the new school year. They already know every child extremely well. They know what they learnt the previous year and what should be the focus for the next year. They know which children need extra support and what type of support they need.

Teachers must continually learn and grow themselves. They can't repeat the lesson plans from the previous year as the class is now a year older. They must remain fresh at all times, deeply knowing and understanding the content which changes each year, and most importantly, adapt themselves each year to the developmental age of the children in their class. You can't teach a child in Class 1 the same way you work with a Class 6 child. Therefore teachers in Steiner schools study together and form a deep understanding of child development for each year, how it relates to the curriculum and pedagogical style.

Another key aspect of the primary years in Steiner schools is the importance of reverence and rhythm. School communities come together to celebrate the seasonal festivals. Children learn to respect the natural world with many outdoor adventures, bushwalks, camps and gardening programs. Students are given high quality natural materials to work with, developing a sense of wonder and reverence, embedded in each school's culture and practices.

**Why do Steiner educators focus so much on the Arts and movement?**

Neurological studies show the importance of activities such as movement to develop important vestibular processes that support the early understanding of literacy and numeracy. Besides physical activities such as games, sports, dance, drama etc., two movement activities unique to Steiner education are Eurythmy and Bothmer Gymnastics.

Eurythmy is a movement art incorporating the integration of artistic endeavour and academic learning through gesture and spatial patterning. Age appropriate movement with music, stories and poetry encourages dexterity, coordination, confidence, social and spatial awareness, inner flexibility and grace. Bothmer Gymnastics orients the child in space and in relation to others, allowing students to be active in the world. This gymnastic activity develops key movement skills and balance between spatial forces of gravity. Children experience the vertical, horizontal and sagittal planes in carefully designed gymnastic sequences appropriate to each age level.

Art enrichments important in each classroom lead by the Class Teacher and other specialists. The Arts are fully integrated throughout the Steiner curriculum and are not add-ons, but a vital and significant part of each day to provide optimal learning experiences. In the Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework, the Arts are seen to provide 'spatial, tonal, rhythmic, colour and sculptural experiences of form, gesture, relationship, growth, transformation, meaning and beauty'. For example, music is known to increase literacy skills such as phenomenological awareness and word recognition. Playing musical instruments requires the mastery of complex skills, involve both left and right brain functions, improves memory and develops the ear in terms of pitch and enhances listening skills. Music is also a social activity and brings groups together in harmony and joy.

Another distinguishing feature of a primary Steiner education is the important focus placed on handicrafts. Fine motor skills, appreciation of aesthetics, complex design skills and working hard, developing the will to achieve the satisfaction of completing a task are all benefits of the handicraft program which builds on prior skills. In Class 1, learning to knit is a key skill learnt which not only helps children cross the mid-line, an important development for reading, but also supports dexterity in fine motor skills, diligence, problem solving, design skills and patience. These skills are furthered throughout the years with more complex patterns, crochet, cross-stitch, sewing, embroidery, weaving, doll making, sculpture, modelling, woodwork, carving, mosaic etc.

Handicraft design tasks result in finished objects which are beautiful, useful, made with high quality materials and created to last. In the fast paced technological world we live in, where everything is attuned to instant gratification, these skills are more important than ever before. Being able to focus for a lengthy period of time on a task, that may be repetitive and difficult with little reward in between, is a skill, which is sadly being eroded. Listening to instructions, following them and problem solving when things don't always go the way they are expected to, builds resilience, diligence and satisfaction after great effort.

Craft programs often relate to the Main Lesson blocks; when studying Ancient India the children may make intricately embroidered stuffed felt toy elephants, when studying Ancient Greece, they may model beautiful Grecian urns, when studying Ancient Rome the whole class may design and make a beautiful mosaic in the school grounds as a gift to the school. These skills easily adapt in the later years to applying digital and design technologies effectively, creatively and ethically.

In 1919 Dr Steiner said that:

> ... the Waldorf School will be a primary school that teaches its students through basing its educational goals and curriculum on insight into the nature of the total human being, an insight that must be alive in each teacher to the extent that this is possible under current circumstances. Naturally, the children in each grade must be brought to the point where they can meet demands that are made in accordance with contemporary ways of looking at things.


In summary, a Steiner primary education encompasses a deep knowledge approach, using balanced and integrated learning strategies. Schools value and foster a strong sense of community in order to provide students with a balanced, well-rounded education. They encourage strong relationships between families, teachers and parents, who work together to support students to learn with confidence, joy and enthusiasm.

To find out more, contact Steiner Education Australia

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