

National Steiner Certificate High School Qualification for Steiner Schools in New Zealand: an Update

Jane Patterson

Michael Park Waldorf School
Auckland
New Zealand

My last article written about two years ago (J.Patterson, 2006), described in outline the development of our Steiner Schools High School Qualification. We are now in the implementation phase in all four High Schools, working at the challenge of making it rigorous while reflecting the heart of our education, with all the implications of creative freedom that is implied in this.

Rigour and Comparability

Part of the formal work towards rigour and comparability is the moderation processes that the schools are developing internally, with the dialogue between colleagues that this engenders. Another part of it is the external moderation, where documentation, student work, and assessment practices are critiqued by experienced teachers outside the individual school. From these processes will arise a collection of exemplars of work that will form the standards that we are setting for ourselves and our students. These will need to be continuously updated so that we do not get stuck with one way of doing things that quickly becomes outdated, while at the same time setting clear expectations of quality work full of intelligent creativity and artistic thoughtfulness.

University Entrance

As described in my previous article, our long term goal is to have this qualification accepted as University Entrance for all tertiary institutes, and similarly by employers' organisations. At present, this is not the case. Many – indeed most – Universities and other tertiary providers continue to accept Steiner School

students as they have for years, with the advocacy of the school involved, which in turn is based on the work they complete, and the results they achieve in the National Steiner Certificate. Similarly with employers, especially those who have had experience of Steiner Students in the past. However, this is not the situation with all Universities at present, and the process of having our qualification accepted by all such bodies is an ongoing one.

Subject Cluster Groups

In the meantime, the schools are aware that this process of becoming more rigorous, which often means an increase in focus on documentation and process, does not necessarily produce better classroom and learning experiences. We have therefore begun Cluster Groups – the meeting of all the high school teachers in one particular subject for three days. This year we have had meetings of the Maths teachers, and of the English teachers, and it is generally agreed that this was the best professional development and the most inspiring way of working together that we have experienced. They were so successful that schools have committed to freeing up teachers for three days every two years to attend such cluster groups, eventually covering all subjects over a two year period either in this format, or by funding teachers to visit colleagues in other schools.

Aims of the Cluster Groups

Our primary aim is to share our experiences, discuss our differences, and commiserate over – and find some solutions to – the trials we face. We built up a picture of the content of the main and subject lessons in each school, their flavour, intentions, and how they meet the needs of the specific age being worked with. Of course, a lot of time was spent talking (especially with the English teachers), but everyone had brought practical activities, artistic exercises, games and so on for us to experience together.

Comparison in practical activities between Maths and English teachers. The Maths teachers' practical activities were, in general, quite structured, with many of them to do with music or rhythmic patterns. We folded paper into complex forms, solved logic and three dimensional puzzles, played games and of course laughed a lot. The English teachers games were usually word based, with drama games and word challenges of all sorts, and of course we laughed a lot too.

The purpose of the individual subjects

One of the most interesting aspects of our discussions was the exploration of why we teach the subjects we do, and continue to do so after many schools have allowed their students to specialise and move away from a wide curriculum. Some of the reasons are quite esoteric, others are practical and down to earth. Maths is often spoken of as the Queen

of the Sciences and Rudolf Steiner said that Maths is the foundation for morality. Facility with English gives us the power to communicate, and relate the Inner to the Outer in many different ways.

Individual experience of teachers

All the teachers who took part in these cluster groups felt that it was worthwhile and personally satisfying. Our groups included a range from the most experienced teachers in the country to beginners, and the format was not one of pontificating, but of genuine sharing. Rudolf Steiner did say that young teachers were the most appropriate for adolescents, and so the new eyes, a more up-to-date consciousness, and experiences closer to the students we are working with, complemented the experience and understanding of Waldorf pedagogy that

others brought. Everyone went home with new ideas and understandings, and new colleagues who can be contacted quickly and easily whenever there is the need.

Cluster Meetings 2009

Next year the three subject areas will be: 1. The Sciences, 2. Visual Arts, Crafts and Technology, and 3. PE, Health and Eurythmy.

The Future

As the four high schools continue to work together to create a qualification, we realise that this work has several outcomes, some of which were planned and some are fortuitous. There is an increasing awareness and collegiality among teachers from different schools, an important strength in schools which

have very small departments and in which a subject specialist may feel quite isolated. Standards are discussed and work and exemplars shared. The collective wisdom of groups of teachers, each with their own vision, but sharing common aspirations is tapped, and problems common to us all recognised and solutions sought together.

Together we are finding a range of ways, some formed and more bureaucratic and some creative and inspiring, working to create a climate of high expectations and rigour within our schools. It is a worthwhile journey to be undertaking.

Reference

Patterson, J. , (2006) Developing a High School Qualification for Steiner Schools , Journal for Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner Teachers, Initiative Circles of the Pedagogical Section in NZ , Australia and Hawai'i pgs 30-35 .