

A Curriculum Journey – from an individual to a national perspective

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How do Steiner/Waldorf teachers in Australia work with curriculum? They strive to understand the deeper meaning in Steiner's indications and how it relates to the developmental level of the children/young adults in their class/es. Teachers share experiences with colleagues, they reflect on the success or failure of a particular lesson, and how their students received a lesson. Was it with joy? Energy? Enthusiasm? Engagement? Did the students deepen and share their understandings? Teachers not only prepare their lessons with creativity, movement, art and imaginative pictures in mind, they must truly understand and know the content and how it relates to the developmental needs of the child. How the teacher works with the curriculum is individual, collegial and school based. It must be brought with the needs of both class and individual students in mind. Careful observation of students, meditative practice and critical reflection on the part of the teacher, are essential. The teacher must be a life long learner.

As a new teacher 15 years ago, I had an amazing learning journey in front of me. At times the learning curve seemed almost vertical! Not only did I have to prepare 3-week main lesson blocks with a story that I had to create out of myself, that was to leave the children breathless for more, that had to be imbued with the content I needed to teach, but I also had to write my own songs, morning circles, movement and poems. I remember writing out my first story, then the night before my first day with my first class being up until midnight trying to memorise the story I had written (and rewritten!). My husband asked me incredulously, "are you really going to do this every night for seven years?". But even more than that, the middle lessons were also 3-week blocks that were like mini main lessons, again with story, song and poetry. I was full of fear and trepidation when I read that Rudolf Steiner said the first lesson with your new Class One was the most important lesson of all. No pressure!

My learning curve continued to always be steep but always exciting. I loved teaching. I loved learning more about Steiner education. I knew that what I was doing was deeply engaging the children in my class. They loved to learn. I could feel in my heart that it was right and true. My mid-north coast school's curriculum was slightly different from the more "traditional stream". There were similarities and differences between the two streams, both grounded in an understanding of child development and Steiner's indications, yet interpreted at times differently. After a few years, the teachers in the school changed and with that brought new discussions about the school's curriculum. It was important that we developed our own school curriculum out of our understandings of Steiner's indications and maybe we somehow ended up with a blend of both curriculum streams. Recognising and valuing individual school approaches is imperative as teachers strive to work with Steiner's indications in their own school, with their own class needs.

An important moment occurred in 2009 when delegates of the national Steiner association, Rudolf Steiner Schools of Australia (now Steiner Education Australia), passed a motion supporting the writing of an ideal Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework to be submitted to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for national recognition of our different approach. The government, in driving forward the Australian Curriculum agenda, did not want to be seen to be eliminating diversity in education.

However, we did not just want to meet ACARA's requirements. The delegates at this association meeting wanted a framework that would define the core educational perspectives that inform Steiner education; to develop a curriculum framework that supported new teachers; facilitated reflection for the experienced; a framework that provided clarity, inspiration and insight for parents and the wider community; that supported potential growth and development for Steiner education in Australia.

Most importantly we wanted a national curriculum framework that integrated the rationale of the curriculum with Steiner pedagogy and methodology - that is, how educational goals are met. And so Steiner Education Australia's huge task began, to develop a curriculum framework that would be flexible enough to honour the variety of curriculum approaches across Australia, to allow individuality of a variety of school approaches in the curriculum, as well as be true to Steiner's indications. So far the first four subjects, English, Maths, Science and History have been written, as well as a host of supporting documents on child development, graduate outcomes, an important Education Foundations paper and ICT paper. The writers have great depth of experience and knowledge, and worked hard to consult nationally with valued input from Steiner schools across Australia.

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) currently has 35 school members and 8 associate members. Delegates meet biannually to discuss current issues affecting Steiner education, to share ideas and experiences and work collaboratively. The curriculum experience has certainly provided a unique opportunity for dialogue between schools across this vast country, about the essential aspects of Steiner education.

Following on from the retirement of Rosemary Gentle OAM, in January this year I took on the role as CEO of Steiner Education Australia at our new Chatswood office in Sydney. Another steep learning curve in process! I feel honoured to be working for Steiner Education Australia, at a time of great educational change and political intervention; a time when Steiner schools must stand strongly, united in all our diversity, to protect and uphold Steiner education in as many ways as we can creatively and collaboratively imagine. ♦