

Standardised Testing and Rudolf Steiner Education

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Thomas Proctor, Principal of the Christchurch Rudolf Steiner School, is also a member of the executive for the New Zealand Federation of Rudolf Steiner Schools (equivalent to the Fellowship in the UK, the RSSA in Australia and the Bund in Germany).

Democracy is a great concept—both human freedom and equality are enshrined in it—but when, in November last year, the newly elected government in New Zealand instituted policies that are antithetical to the essence of what Rudolf Steiner schools aspire towards, we are in a difficult democratic position.

Difficult, because many of our schools have become integrated with the State (100% funded state schools, with an enshrined special character) and are required to institute government policy whether we agree with its direction or not.

The choice to become part of the state system was a significant destiny choice for our integrated schools and there were always going to be benefits and challenges in this relationship.

We integrated to make ourselves more ‘future resistant’ and have gained enormously from it. Our profile in New Zealand as an educational institution has soared positively over the last two decades to a point where almost everyone has heard of some positive experience of a Steiner pupil. The integrated schools are significantly better housed (in lovely architecturally inspiring buildings) and much better resourced than we could have wished for. Many of our schools are full to overflowing and our support organisations, like the Taruna College for Adult Education, have blossomed because of the full classes and large numbers of teachers we have.

However, integration is also a cross we bear.

It was just two months after entering office, that the new National (conservative) government passed a law requiring students at every level (from school entry to

year 8 or class 7) to be tested yearly to ensure they have achieved the nationally decided norms for literacy and numeracy. This is because of a concern that as a nation our students aren’t achieving highly enough at the National qualifications (NCEA level 2) at about 17 years of age.

For our Waldorf Schools it is entirely antithetical to our core beliefs to impose tests determining academic achievement upon young children with a fairy tale and imaginative consciousness.

Teachers and academics throughout the country have reacted in a variety of negative ways to this legislation – most were concerned that the emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the form of benchmarked standardised testing will be to the detriment of other learning. It hasn’t worked in other countries, has lessened engagement in learning, has increased failure rates, resulted in teachers teaching to the test and in the USA, the funding of schools has even been linked to these test results (Mitchell, 2009).

Our Government’s answer to this criticism is to allow schools to use their present assessment systems. This is certainly a better model than that used in UK and USA but is still being hailed by commentators as a 50 year backwards step.

There are many other problems – like the use of the data to create league tables comparing schools’ achievement to one another (universally detested), how children with learning difficulties will fare, the lack of time for teachers to administer, mark and analyse run tests or how results will be nationally moderated.

For the New Zealand Steiner schools, the new National standards will cut across our philosophy of later learning as one of the ‘cornerstone’ child developmental needs in a Rudolf Steiner education (refer Proctor, T. (2008)).

It’s a critical factor that our integrated schools are facing – and one that could trammel our reason d’être. It’s a real

pity this has happened at this juncture, as 2010 is to be the beginning of new wave of the revised national curriculum – a curriculum that is the best State curriculum seen in years. It is a testament to the maturity of our national education where the qualities of becoming a human are ‘put in centre stage of the learning’ (Ministry of Education 2007). It promulgates key competencies **of thinking, managing yourself, participating and contributing, an ability to use symbols and language and relating to others** which are ‘keys’ to becoming a successful person in the modern world. Subject matter (the lesson content) has become the means by which these qualities can be practised.

The overall vision of this new curriculum is for all students to be confident, life long learners actively involved and connected—it could be taken from a Steiner school charter. Our Waldorf schools celebrated this new direction, as it appeared national state education was becoming closer in its visions to a Steiner ideology. So, although we applauded the new curriculum as a new vision, we are now faced with the national standards which threaten our core beliefs (implemented from 2010, with mandatory reporting to the Government from 2012).

This is not something we can avoid but something that we have to find a way to manage. In its most hard-line form, we may have to decide to be or not to be a Steiner school; i.e., not conform and see what happens, or, find a negotiated compromise through a relationship with the Ministry, (“we”, being the national Steiner body).

The latter is what we are trying to do. Many wonderful parents from our schools wrote submissions to the Ministry expressing their concerns; teachers from our schools have met with Ministry of Education officials, and the general impression is not a gloomy one. Every official has been careful to say they are speaking as an individual and not on behalf of official policy, but the general feeling one gets is that if we can prove that at years four or five (class three or four) and similarly at class 7 that we are meeting the standards there could be no reason why our educational philosophy shouldn’t be continued, particularly as we are responding to the expressed desire of our community (to be a Steiner school).

This gives us hope. There is still much to be done and negotiated.

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Further note: 23rd October, 2009 :

The announcement of the final form of the national standards was announced today. This follows the Minister announcing last week that all advisory services for the Arts, Physical Education, and Science were to be stopped for primary schools and the funding to be directed to numeracy and literacy to support the standards.

Such has been the concern from all NZ principals about the development, consultation and lack of clarity of the process that this announcement (hailed by the Prime Minister as the most important educational statement for 20 years) was boycotted by almost every educational sector.

The New Zealand Federation of Rudolf Steiner Schools intends to strongly represent our case against early testing in the next months, supported by recent PhD research on the positive effects on later academic learning and the most recent review of English learning.

The right wing movement in education worldwide is creating a challenging time for us in New Zealand and one that requires us to both reaffirm what we believe is the essence of a Steiner education, while negotiating a way through the requirements.

In my experience, each of these challenges has both sharpened our purpose and, in a strange but excellent way, made our schools stronger.

References

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