

Supporting Development and Learning at Little Yarra Steiner School

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For five years, the teachers and staff at Little Yarra Steiner School in Victoria, Australia (LYSS) have been working towards enhancing children's development and learning by introducing new initiatives aimed at improving and harmonising their growth and development.

As educators, we seek to meet the unique needs of each child. The class teacher does this through adapting the rich curriculum which itself supports each developmental phase as well as developing a rich social and emotional environment in the classroom. However, there are children in each class who have developmental needs beyond what this offers. At Little Yarra, we offer therapeutic eurythmy for such children and have developed a specialised programme within the school called the Tobias Class to meet their needs.

Archetypally in the first years of life, the development of the child is focused on the shaping of the bodily organs. In a way, invisible forces work as an architect whose insight and imagination manifests itself in the building of the material form. Behind this is the imagination of the etheric/life body as builder, the astral body as architect and the ego as owner¹.

The completion of this first phase becomes visible when, often during the seventh year, the change of teeth begins. This is a sign that forces hitherto used to form the physical being are released to take on a different task. The child becomes eager to learn and this learning is nourished by the vivid, engaging images given by the teacher.

Around the age of nine, the child begins to perceive the world differently. She begins to



feel the difference between the outer world and herself. A new way of perceiving and discriminating between different elements in the world can become evident. This process is often accompanied by feelings of loneliness or isolation – for the first time the child confronts its own mortality. It is a time when the inner being of the child comes into its own.

At 12, this inner essence, which first emerged at nine, begins developing strongly and growing to

¹ See Steiner, R. (1973). *Theosophy*. London, United Kingdom: Rudolf Steiner Press for details

a point where it can flower and become manifest. At this time, the child is especially sensitive and vulnerable and she reaches out into the social element. Social interaction becomes essential in supporting this process.

However, not every child follows this archetypal path. There are those in each class who have further and specific developmental needs. They are the children whose physical, emotional or inner development does not appear to keep pace with their peers. Their learning differs from the classical model and they need individual attention beyond that which is possible in a classroom situation. When this attention is given at just the right point in time, it can influence further development in a positive way.

At LYSS we offer two ways of supporting children: the Tobias Class and therapeutic eurythmy.



The Tobias Class

The Tobias Class contains approximately six children of a range of ages. They join the class for varying reasons ranging from specific learning difficulties to finding that a busy classroom creates “sensory overload”. The focus of the class is to engage the children in various hands-on activities as well as more formal studies. It suits kinesthetic learners especially who are able to participate in small building projects, caring for farm animals, gardening or cooking on a regular basis. All these activities have a therapeutic and

harmonising aspect. They allow the children to experience a learning environment which is not stressful. They begin to develop confidence and more resilience as their progress is supported.

Children attend the Tobias Class for their main lesson and most other lessons until lunch time. They return to their own classes for morning tea and at break times as well as for activities which are socially inclusive like orchestra, singing, eurythmy and crafts. In this way, the children remain strongly part of the social fabric of the class, but also have a smaller and socially inclusive group where they are comfortable. During the week, the children also have a session of therapeutic eurythmy.

This model of learning is established in Germany, England, New Zealand and other countries. The main difference between the schools in these countries and the Tobias Class at Little Yarra is that elsewhere classes are usually separate from the main school streams. The Tobias Class straddles the gap between therapeutic and mainstream education – an educational model which is inclusive and where individual needs can be met.

Therapeutic Eurythmy

In the physical body many processes take place that are, in the first instance, invisible; one becomes aware of them when an illness occurs. The forces that build up and maintain the physical body are used for expression in eurythmy through the movement of the arms and the legs. Eurythmy is an art form that makes visible forces otherwise invisible in the human being. It is somewhat like the process of activation in the larynx before a sound is made. The forces behind the speech become visible in eurythmic movement².

There are three forms of eurythmy: artistic eurythmy, which is done on the stage and serves the audience; pedagogical eurythmy which is done with a group and pertains to the group as a whole. The eurythmist often works with the children who are the same age and are at the same stage of development; lastly, therapeutic or individual eurythmy where the gestures are made

2 For an introduction, see Spock, M. (1980). Eurythmy. Hudson, NY: Steiner Books.

closer to the physical body to harmonise where disharmony exists. This can be most effective with children.

As the child moves through the stages of development, there is always a possibility of regression or congestion. At such moments therapeutic eurythmy can help the child move forward in their development more easily.

At Little Yarra, we see it as beneficial to offer therapeutic eurythmy to each child from kindergarten to class 2 in the form of a series of individual sessions. There is always a possibility for particular children to work more intensively or longer when the need arises, throughout their time at school.

These two approaches to supporting the child's development in the primary school are proving successful. It can be seen as smoothing the path of development thereby making the child's educational experience enjoyable and rewarding. ♦



Imelda Verbraak studied eurythmy in Den Haag, and eurythmy therapy in England. In Holland she worked for fourteen years as a eurythmy teacher and later as a eurythmy therapist at a primary school, as well as at an anthroposophic clinic. Imelda has performed on stage in Steiner Schools in her area as well as in Steiner's mystery plays (in Dutch).

For the past six years she has lived and worked in Australia and is associated with the Little Yarra Steiner School where therapeutic eurythmy has become part of the curriculum and is offered to each child. She gives lectures and performances in the area around Melbourne as well as in Chengdu, China.

Julie Sale: lives outside Melbourne in Victoria where she is a support education teacher at the Little Yarra Steiner School in the Yarra Valley. Before working in the area of support education, Julie was a class teacher for many years. She is able to bring this experience to developing the Tobias programme at the School. Julie began teaching at the Little Yarra Steiner School in the school's beginning years and has taught at the school ever since. In the Tobias class she is able to bring her practical experience of being brought up on a property in Queensland to the children.

RoSE – Research on Steiner Education

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