



Supporting Student Learning at the Central Coast Rudolf Steiner School

Steiner's visionary pedagogy was developed almost one hundred years ago. His picture of the human being endures in its profound relevance to today's world. Over time, many aspects of his teachings have been revised as new understandings become evident. For example, Steiner advocated 'correcting' left-handedness and he thought that forty students in a class was an ideal size. Neither are common contemporary practices, for good reasons. So we are called upon as Steiner educators to work collaboratively to question and evolve our pedagogical practices. This is our task, our daily work borne out of heart-felt commitment.

In a Steiner School, our educational philosophy is centred around key principles. First and foremost is the principle of reverence for the child and the protection of childhood. Steiner saw premature intellectual teaching as detrimental to the child's development at a fundamental level. For this reason, Steiner schools delay the introduction of formal literacy and numeracy instruction until class one.

Literacy teaching at the kindergarten level is achieved through a varied and vibrant oral language program. In place of academic instruction, the child is immersed in a language-rich program that includes fairy and folk tales, nature stories, songs, morning circle, verses, finger games, and puppet shows. The literacy foundations are laid creatively through a love of the living word and a love of narrative. In this way, the children develop language and listening skills as well as phonological awareness- they develop an ear for the sounds, rhythms and rhymes of language. As Steiner articulated:

'Only when you have taught the children in this way to use their hands and ears is the time ripe for progressing to the first elements of reading'.
(*Practical Advice to Teachers*, 1919)

In class one, the students are introduced to the letters of the alphabet and their sounds (phonics). In a Steiner school, writing precedes reading so that the will of the child is engaged. The letters are introduced imaginatively; their form is drawn out of a beautiful picture. A love of language and story is nurtured throughout the primary years, enlivening the imagination and broadening the horizons of the child.

A pedagogy that highly values literacy and numeracy sits rightly within our wholistic, developmentally appropriate approach. In particular, literacy is a pivotal foundational ability - crucial to success in all learning areas. Literacy is often referred to as the 'skill that begets many other skills' (Heckman 2000). Literacy success also has a strong impact on the self-esteem and wellbeing of the student.

Many areas of contemporary research are validating the strengths of Steiner practices. This is heartening. There are also some areas of weakness where Steiner educators can learn from current understandings. Historically, Steiner schools in

Australia have not had a strong record in helping students who need extra literacy and numeracy support in a timely way. This is an issue that is widely recognised amongst contemporary leaders in Steiner education and it is being addressed responsibly.

Through initiatives that have arisen out of our recent focus on literacy and numeracy, we have worked to align our Steiner pedagogy with research-based understanding of best literacy and numeracy practices. Our teachers have taken part in professional development, we have been able to employ more learning support staff and purchase excellent learning resources. Our teaching practices have improved in many areas, as has the use of assessment for learning.

Assessment in a Steiner school is a comprehensive, sensitive and daily activity. Based on highly attuned observational practices, the teachers come to understand their students and their learning needs deeply. A child's social skills, speech, temperament, musicality, drawings, handwriting, main lesson book, paintings, physical skills, capacity to imitate, curiosity, family circumstances, general health - all of these and more are part of our picture-building of the whole child. In terms of literacy, the focus in kindergarten is on oral language skills and phonological awareness. Both are excellent predictors of reading success. In classes one and two, our focus is on oral language skills, phonological awareness and phonics. Comprehension and fluency of language are also among the 'building blocks' for reading success and are monitored sequentially.

When the word 'standardised' is used to describe an assessment process, Steiner educators raise valid questions. Concerns are justified, especially when we observe how 'high stakes' standardised tests are used to dictate narrow content of teaching and place undue pressure on young learners. This approach that is not consistent with the principles of Steiner pedagogy. Tracey Sayn Wittgenstein Piraccini, CEO of Steiner Education Australia, has written an outstanding [article](#) on the negative impacts of NAPLAN. This article was submitted to parliament in 2013.

At our school, we observe and monitor the child's development responsibly. We do not place pressure on children or implement assessments in order to label or compare them. We cherish their individuality and use assessment for the sole purpose of closely observing their development and supporting them. With great care, we monitor student progress *formatively* i.e. we observe where they are in their learning and these observations inform both our teaching and our learning support practices.

We use a wide range of observational methods that help teachers understand more about individual student learning needs, as legislatively required by the *Australian Professional Standards for Teaching*. Our curriculum makes reference to standards in that it articulates what students are expected to know or to be able to do at each year level. When teachers monitor student progress consistently, according to common reference points, they can accurately describe the nature of the child's progress and identify where exactly an individual child is struggling, as well as his or her strengths.

If a child is identified as in need of learning support, this is discussed by the class teacher with parents/guardians. If required, an Individual Learning Plan is developed. This is always done in consultation with parents/guardians and is legislated practice for all schools. The Individual Learning Plan may involve adjustments to curriculum content, a support person to work within the classroom, small group work, one-to-one support or 'Extra Lesson'. Whatever forms of support are agreed upon, the premise of our approach is that early identification and intervention are most effective in consolidating foundational literacy and numeracy skills. The longer this support is delayed, the harder it is to narrow gaps in learning. Lisa Evans and Sharon Everson are our learning support teachers and they both provide loving, encouraging and well-informed care of our young learners. Heather van Zyl provides 'Extra Lesson' support.

The vital questions and conversations that inform our pedagogical practices are interrogated deeply within the college of teachers. We seek to responsibly align what we consider to be the best contemporary educational insights with our Steiner principles. The process of reflecting on and refining our practices is ongoing. I firmly believe that the college of teachers is rising to the challenge with integrity. The best interests of the developing whole child guide our decision making at every step.

Recently, a leading American Steiner educator, Steve Sagrin, lectured here in Australia and I had the opportunity to discuss future directions of Steiner education with him. In his book, 'The Story of Waldorf Education in the United States', Sagrin writes the following:

'Conversations along these lines, conversations that begin with research and a clear understanding of Steiner's educational work, and that take into account current practices and their validity and efficacy, will clarify our work in schools and move us toward ever better teaching and learning. Finally, however, these conversations can only go as deep as the persons having them are capable of going. It is incumbent on each one of us to continue our development as human beings through contemplative, reflective practice and through warm, honest relationships with each other.'

<http://www.steinereducation.edu.au/files/Sagrin%20Beyond%20Myth.pdf>

Should you wish to discuss your child's development with his or her teachers, I trust that you will receive a rich, multi-faceted and accurate picture of how your child is developing. I hope that this information has helped clarify our ever-evolving pedagogy at Central Coast Rudolf Steiner School.

Rosemary Michalowski
Principal

