

The Steiner approach

ECE resources

Steiner education, also called Waldorf Education after the factory in which the first school was started, is an educative approach drawing selectively on the teachings and philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. Steiner developed his ideas for education in the aftermath of the World War I, and focused on imaginative, aesthetic and holistic methods to support children to reach their full potential as creative, intelligent and well-rounded human beings. Steiner education caters for children from early childhood (kindergarten) through to the end of secondary education, although this research review focuses particularly on early childhood education.

In Steiner's philosophy, a non-material, spiritual world is believed to influence and inform the material one. This philosophy stands behind Steiner practices and teaching, although it is not explicitly taught. Each Steiner school or early childhood centre is independent and encouraged to be responsive to its own context, meaning that common principles and values may be expressed in different ways.

The main features of the Steiner approach

Strong relationships: Children keep the same teacher for their entire kindergarten education, before transitioning to another teacher for the primary years (seven to 14 years old). Teachers develop a deep understanding of children's individual needs, their behaviour, personality, temperament, parents and family, as well as the gifts that children bring with them from the spiritual world, which help teachers to understand how they will learn and how best to teach them. Strong relationships with parents help parents to understand some of the philosophy behind the practice so that it can be reinforced at home.

A holistic theory of child development: Children are seen as active agents of their own development, driven by natural, self-guiding forces that show them the way towards learning and growth. Steiner's description of the development of the human being linked physical changes (such as the loss of milk teeth, and the onset of puberty) to changes in ways of being, knowing and learning that reflected the evolution of human development. Children in the early childhood years are seen to think in imaginative, dynamic and pictorial ways, and hold a 'dreamy' (not-yet intellectual and imaginative) consciousness. In early childhood education in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, this means that the environment of the kindergarten will be homely, familiar and natural – there are no formal or contrived academic activities, and teachers avoid intellectualising, and giving explanations or instructions. For example, teachers might respond to children's questions with 'I wonder' rather than with technical information, and they might offer models for imitation and develop familiar rhythms for activity that avoid the need for instruction. Overstimulation from sources such as television and electronics or academic learning and abstract knowledge is thought to interfere with children's dreamy consciousness. Instead teachers aim to provide rich sensory environments for children, encourage children's free-flowing ideas and actions and optimal physical growth aided by practices that enhance energy and life forces.

In the first seven years, the educative focus is on

- **Physical development** including the final differentiation of individual organs, the coordination of the limb system and development of the senses and nervous system.
- **Learning through imitation** of what is heard, felt and experienced, as the major impetus for development.

- **Developing will**, or the ability to follow a decision or action to completion, which enables children to solve problems, use imagination and develop creative play and is required to later achieve literacy, numeracy, creative thinking and self-actualisation in adulthood.

From seven to fourteen years of age, children are able to create mental pictures and interpret the world through **feeling** (while with the onset of puberty around fourteen, they are thought to develop a capacity for abstract **thinking**).

A focus on aesthetic and artistic elements: The curriculum includes visual art, craft, music, dance, storytelling, and drama. Everything is presented to children in a creative, artistic way in order to avoid the over-intellectualisation of an academic approach, to enhance children's natural sense of awe and wonder and to help them connect with their spiritual or inner life. Observational drawing and colouring-in is discouraged, and children are encouraged to work with colour. They are told fairy tales, fables and myths which harness features such as archetypal imagery to cultivate imagination and teach values. These stories are often told rather than read aloud, or are accompanied with mime and puppetry, to enable the teacher's own creative expression. Song and story are used to develop listening skills, concepts and imagination, and to provide children with pictures or images in their minds which they can use in play.

Play: Steiner teachers aim to create an environment that facilitates children's self-directed free play. In Steiner philosophy, free play supports the proper development of the will, and children are trusted to work out identities, relationships, fantasy and reality for themselves through play. Play materials should be simple and open-ended, including natural materials and objects that have been only minimally shaped by hand such as pieces of wood, strips of cloth, unspun fleece, and dolls with minimal features which allow children to transform them with their imagination. Plastic toys, electronic media and educational games are avoided to ensure that the impressions made on the child are natural, organic forms. Teachers aim to create the right conditions for play, and support children to keep the play fluid, intrinsically driven and engaging children's whole bodies. For example, they might remind children that a camping place always has a fire on which people cook their meals to plant ideas verbally, or they might offer particular props.

Rhythms and repetition: Rhythm is thought important to protect the life forces of the child. The importance of rhythm is recognised through a cyclical schedule of daily, weekly and yearly activities. There may be artistic display of offerings from nature to demonstrate the rhythms of the seasons and seasonal and cultural festivals may be celebrated. Routines might include lighting a candle to precede storytelling, or marking the beginning and end of each day with a song or acting out a story. The environment also has its own rhythm and order, with things kept in the same place to provide children with security.

Real work: Steiner educators believe that the purposeful and useful work of real life, such as housework, cooking, cleaning, toymaking and gardening, as well as the teacher's artistic pursuits and crafts, should be included in the kindergarten or early childhood programme in order to demonstrate order, good habits, and rhythm. Adults who are active in a purposeful, calm and organised way create a range of possibilities for imitation and guide the children's wills in a strong direction. Teachers' absorption in their work encourages children's curiosity, and while children are not asked to participate, they are often highly motivated to participate or imitate these activities. Teachers offer strong role models for attitudes and approaches to work and activity.

Experiences in nature: In the early childhood years children are especially open to learning from their environments and are encouraged to retain a sense of unity or communion with the natural world. Much time is devoted to outdoor education because of its importance to sensory and motor stimulation, and because the harmony and beauty of nature are thought to accord with children's imagination. Children

spend a lot of time outdoors, and are enabled to learn from the natural world through their own interests and self-initiated play with simple resources such as sand, water, sticks, stones and leaves.

Empirical findings

Proponents of Steiner education have not sought to research the outcomes for children that result from their programme, although there has been some interest in the testimonials of graduates and parents. Some studies have found that Steiner-educated students perform above average academically¹ and are more creative². However, these results are complicated by the higher than average proportion of parents with an academic or artistic background in Steiner communities.

Empirical findings for outcomes in the early years include greater drawing and artistic skill, including use of colour³, whilst older students report:

- Stronger motivation, interest and identification with the teaching content of their schools, including greater interest and engagement in social and moral issues and a strong sense of activism
- Greater levels of creativity and independence in learning
- Higher self-confidence, self-esteem, creativity and tolerance
- Positive relationships with teachers

A high level of attendance at university or college⁴

However, older students also report dissatisfaction with lack of feedback and lack of challenge, and higher use of additional coaching (particularly in mathematics and foreign languages)⁵[6].

General research into effective pedagogy in the early years of schooling confirms the importance of oral language development and the significance of storytelling on children's language skills, while the use of repetition is associated with increased vocabulary, use of grammar and comprehension.

How you might begin to explore this approach in your own teaching

There are many ways in which the central principles which underpin Steiner pedagogy align with the context for early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, Steiner beliefs in the interconnectedness of all things as a way of knowing, and of the spiritual forces contained in each and every thing, align with Māori and other non-Western theories of being and knowledge. The concept of a strong sense of children's spiritual ancestry as guiding the child's development present in Steiner education is also aligned with Māori and many Pasifika worldviews. Finally Te Whāriki's insistence on respecting the mana (spiritual life force or energy) of the child can be related to the Steiner understanding of the spiritual influences guiding each child's development, which leads to respect for and acceptance of each child. Trusting in the child's playful and self-initiated explorations, which are viewed as a source of development in Te Whāriki, is also highly relatable to the Steiner approach to education.

You might try some of the pedagogical techniques of Steiner educators, which include **building pictures** for children verbally to enrich children's imaginative play, or **developing a mindful engagement with daily chores** by completing these chores calmly and slowly, seeing them as a learning influence on children rather than something to be rushed through. You might reconsider the play props you provide for children, and move towards **the provision of more open-ended materials**, and you might choose to **increase children's experiences outdoors with and in nature**.

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Endnotes

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² Gidley, J. M. (1998). Prospective youth visions through imaginative education. *Futures*, 30, (5), 395–408.

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³ Cox, M. V., & Rowlands, A. (2000). The effect of three different educational approaches on children's drawing ability: Steiner, Montessori and traditional. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70, 485-503.

⁴ Baldwin, F., Gerwin, D., & Mitchell, D. (2005). Research on Waldorf Graduates in North America Phase I.

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⁵ Randall, D. & Peters, J. (2015). Empirical research on Waldorf education. *Educar em Revista*, 56, 33-47.

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