



Interview with Paul Anthony White, Auckland University of Technology

Rudolf Steiner : Origins, Philosophy and Education

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CN: How did you first get into Steiner?

The story begins when I was teaching in a state primary school and a parent came to me and said: "So what's happening with my daughter?" I replied, "... your daughter is doing fine, her reading is a bit behind but otherwise..." the mother then said: "No, what's happening with her?" I then realised I didn't really know her daughter beyond how well she was doing academically. I knew my subjects pretty well but I realised that I didn't really know the children I was teaching. Later I found out that this child of nine was going through what is known as the nine-year-old threshold in Steiner terms. It was after that experience I got interested in other philosophies of education. I visited Summerhill School and was rather underwhelmed but became increasingly interested in what Steiner had said and was really impressed with what I saw in Steiner schools, so I decided to take a look at a Steiner college.

CN: What college did you go and look at?

Emerson College in England.

CN: What was it about Steiner that impressed you and presumably led you to train to become a Steiner teacher?

The funny thing was that I asked just to go along for the day to Emerson, and I was very naïve and thought the Brighton to London train would have a stop nearby. It didn't. I got off the train at 7.30am, miles away from Emerson. Yet, after a series of extraordinary flukes I managed to get there exactly on time. Later that day, I was sharing some of my reservations about Steiner education with the course tutor, Georg Locker. The subject of angels came up. Georg asked me if there had never been a time in my life when I had felt that I was being helped by something outside myself. I was immediately struck by the memory of my getting to Emerson that morning. I wouldn't say from that moment I embraced the idea of angels but I was certainly a little more open to the possibility of their existence.

CN: Is there, would you say, a strong connection between Christianity and Steiner?

When Steiner was 40 years old he experienced on a deep level, the significance of Christ's death and resurrection for the evolution of humankind. Christianity is not a subject in the Steiner curriculum - indeed, some argue that greater attention is given to non-Christian religious traditions in a Steiner school - but "the Christ event" is seen as very significant in anthroposophy.



CN: What is Anthroposophy?

One description might be a modern spiritual path. In Steiner's words, it is the path that can 'lead the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe'. As Steiner demonstrated in his own life, it is not a path retreating from life in the physical world but rather a path that is capable of inspiring many cultural innovations – in education, agriculture, medicine, architecture, science and arts – and much else.

CN: What would you say is happening now in Steiner education?

Steiner education is growing very rapidly. While the Nazis closed the first pioneer schools in Germany during the War, Steiner education recovered very quickly afterwards and it has now become well-established in Europe. In the last 20 years, there has been a huge growth in Steiner education worldwide. I believe Steiner education is the second largest private education provider in the world after the Catholic schools with 1200 schools in over 60 countries.

CN: What would you say Paul is the hallmark of Steiner education as opposed to mainstream education?

Steiner education works from a particular picture of the human being which recognises both the spiritual and material aspects of our human nature. Steiner education is not just an education of the head, but of the heart and hands as well. If, as teachers, we are ignorant of the true nature of the child, our education can be more harmful than supportive of the healthy development of the child.

CN: So how does that manifest itself in Steiner teaching and curriculum?

The curriculum in Steiner schools is geared towards the particular needs of children at their particular ages. This means subjects are introduced to children schools at a time and in a way that is right for their stage of development.

CN: So teaching acknowledges a child's spiritual development?

Spiritual, soul and physical development; just as physical development occurs in spurts, followed by slower, gradual change, so spirit itself and soul development does not occur in a linear, incremental fashion. On a general level, this manifests itself in different ways at the different levels of the schooling. In the kindergarten, the children are living much more in their limbs than their heads, so the central motif is play. In the primary school the children are living more strongly in the realm of feeling, which is why story, music, rhythm and art play such an important role in the Steiner primary schools. In the High Schools, children are very much in the realm of thinking. They need specialist teachers who know their subject well, teachers who can inspire them.

CN: What about the development of the person and the child in the arts, the making aspect? What would that mean for those learning music in a Steiner school?

Children learn to read and write music in the primary school. Yes, the making aspect is very important in a Steiner school. In the school where I taught for seven years, the children were taught to sew, to knit, to carve



stone, to mould clay – taken by them out of the ground – to maintain a vegetable garden, to make wooden toys and other objects from wood, to use a pole lathe, to hammer out pokers, knives and jewellery in a smithy... It is a real education of the will.

CN: Is there a strong link do you believe between Steiner and co-constructivism or Vygotsky?

I don't think so, at least not in primary school. Children at this stage of development have a natural inclination or wish to look up to someone as an authority, someone they can learn from and be inspired by. From this person, they can learn things that they do not yet understand, things that may only come to be meaningful when they are well into adult life.

CN: Would you say Steiner is more constructivist, Piagetian in other words?

I think some parallels can be found but I'm not sure how helpful it is to try to define a pedagogy in terms of another.

CN: Can you tell us a bit about the Steiner set up at AUT?

As part of the three year Bachelor of Education course in both Primary and ECE, students are able to specialize in Steiner, Pasifika or Montessori education in their third year.

CN: So you work with third year students mainly?

Yes, though I do give various introductory sessions on Steiner education in earlier years to help students make an informed choice at the end of their second year. I also teach on some mainstream papers like the second-year art paper.

CN: So are there a number of Steiner kindergartens in Auckland?

Yes, there are both schools and kindergartens in Ellerslie and Titirangi.

CN: In those kindergartens do they have staff trained in Steiner and can staff do Steiner courses if they wish? If so, are there online courses available?

There are early childhood teachers in Steiner kindergartens throughout the country who are relatively new to Steiner education but keen to develop their understanding. To meet this need, the Taruna Steiner Training Centre in Hawkes Bay runs inservice training seminars to which their kindergartens will send their teachers. They are run as four one-week blocks over two years. Alternatively, teachers could take the Steiner papers here at AUT which, from next year, will be delivered in a blended format, involving a block on campus in January and July with the rest being online.

CN: What then happens to the Steiner students when they leave Steiner schooling and enter higher education? How do they find it?

There are now several Steiner school graduates doing the B.Ed here at AUT and they all seem to be doing very well! The expectation of the schools is that the education will give them the self-confidence, resourcefulness and self-motivation to do very well at whatever they turn their hand to, which of course includes entering higher education. As part of their final year, Steiner



school students are required to work on their own project which they will present in a public forum. I attended one such [graduation] in the Lower Hutt. I was shown a project yesterday in which the student had attended night classes on portrait drawing over several months to develop familiarity with a range of media. She then did portraits of all her classmates in these media and the book she produced was really quite stunning. Other projects I have seen included that of a girl who enjoyed writing her own songs and found a way of getting her music professionally recorded. One boy who had a novel published and another studied car engines in order to fix up an abandoned Volkswagen.

The question of whether the lack of emphasis on exams will prejudice the students' chances of getting into universities is a real one. Two of the four Steiner Upper Schools in the country offer the students the NCEA qualifications as not all universities in the country take Steiner students on the basis of their Steiner certificate and the advocacy of the school. There is a group within the Steiner schools' community working to gain recognition for the Steiner certificate although this is still a relatively new qualification.

CN: *Te Whāriki* was mentioned. Do you feel there is a close tie with Steiner education particularly in the early years?

Very much so, Kotahitanga – a picture of holistic development that embraces the spiritual aspect of the child - is fundamental to both.

CN: Have you looked at Steiner in other countries and do you see any differences?

The striking thing about Steiner education throughout the world is not so much the differences as the similarities. Of course, there are important differences – the schools must reflect the cultural-social environment in which the children grow up – but the similarities do suggest children at particular ages have rather more in common than we may recognise.

CN: Schopenhauer, Goethe and Nietzsche? Is their influence on Steiner studied at AUT?

The emphasis of the undergraduate course, particularly in third-year is rather more on practice than theory, so there is little comparative philosophy.

CN: What is it with Kant and Steiner? Are Kant's ideas still rejected?

While respecting Kant, Steiner had a fundamental disagreement on the question of limits to our knowing. Indeed, Steiner gave directions as to how we might seek to develop faculties that lie dormant within us, that will enable us to perceive what lies beyond the immediately perceptible. The spiritual is a reality for Steiner: it was a reality that could be known as objectively as the material world.

CN: You have a degree course, a masters course, are you looking at secondary or other courses and what is the next milestone for Steiner at AUT?

While I'd like to see a secondary Steiner training [programme] at AUT, realistically, given the current economic climate, I'm not holding my breath. The drive towards more online learning has swept into AUT taking Steiner in its wake or rather on its crest! From next year, as mentioned, the Steiner



papers will be delivered in a blended format; part campus-based and part online.

CN: Is it that AUT is the only university offering this blended format when teaching Steiner?

Certainly in New Zealand.

CN: In Australia?

A Steiner paper at masters' level is offered at Canberra University and there is an initiative in South Australia but I'm not aware of any other courses at university level.

CN: Is there a Steiner conference or a journal?

There are Anthroposophical Conferences annually, Steiner Teachers' Conferences biannually, Steiner Kindergarten Conferences biannually and an international Kolisko conference (doctors, teachers, nurses) every three or four years; the next one being in 2010. Details of these are available from www.anthroposophy.org.nz. There are two journals which come out quarterly and a site that readers may find useful is www.whywaldorfworks.org, though there are plenty of sites on Steiner education on the web.

CN: Thank you for your time Paul and all the best with your many ventures.

My pleasure.