

Steiner 2021: The curation of contemporary education

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Publication details:

Commissioning Body: Steiner Education Australia

Publication Date:

2021-08-20

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/28094>

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Steiner 2021

The curation of contemporary education

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Steiner 2021

The curation of contemporary education

Steiner / Waldorf education has a history dating back to 1919. Today there are over 1,300 schools and 2,000 kindergartens in 80 countries. Australia has its own rich history of Steiner education and enrolments are growing. It is timely to have a conversation within and across schools about what Steiner education is and can be in the contemporary Australian context.

Highlights

- The number of schools and students enrolled in Steiner education is **growing yet remain peripheral** within the Australian school education sector.
- Diversity across schools and acceptance of education for freedom has created a **challenge of legitimacy**.
- Rather than pursuing leadership, Steiner philosophy aligns better with the **curation of contemporary education** as a goal.
- Topics that require attention within and across schools include i) **principles or prescription**; ii) **distinctions or difference**; iii) **pedagogy for the 21st century**; and iv) **enduring tensions and pressures**.

Steiner education is centrally concerned with enabling children to find their creativity and to become free individuals who can think for themselves, make their own judgements and find their own purpose and direction in life.¹ Through a Relational Inquiry into the Provision of Schooling (RIPS) analysis, this report seeks to stimulate a conversation of where Steiner education is and where it is going in the Australian context.

A Relational Inquiry into the Provision of Schooling (RIPS) analysis

The research presented in this report draws on the following data:

- A snapshot of Steiner Education Australia (SEA) schools generated with school profile and location data sets from ACARA;
- An interview-based study with 24 principals or equivalent from SEA schools throughout the country; and
- The analytical resources of a RIPS analysis.

There is more work to be done in understanding the contemporary Steiner school in Australia. This report is just the beginning of a conversation.

¹ Source: [About Rudolf Steiner and the growth of the Steiner/Waldorf education movement - Steiner Education Australia](#)

A Snapshot of Steiner Education Australia Schools

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) represents a collection of 50 members and 13 associate members throughout Australia. **Committed to making a Steiner education accessible for all who want it**, SEA supports playgroups, pre-schools, schools (primary and combined), home schooling, and government schools with Steiner streams or Steiner inspired programs. This report focuses on data related to member primary and combined schools. Figure 1 displays a map of SEA members throughout Australia.

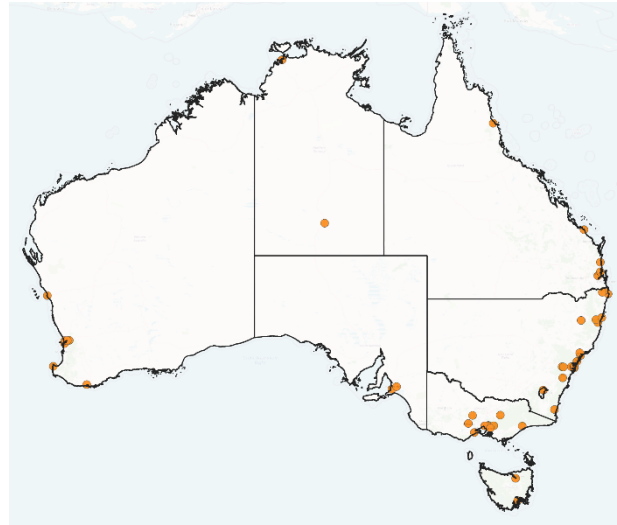


Fig.1. SEA member schools

The [Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework](#) is one of only three alternate national curriculum frameworks assessed as comparable with the Australian Curriculum.² In doing so, it is one of the only national Government endorsed Steiner curriculum frameworks globally.

Growing but peripheral

Since 2008, data from ACARA indicates that SEA members schools have experienced a **38.4 per cent increase in enrolments** – representing some of the largest growth in the Australian schooling sector.³ However, despite this growth, SEA members schools only constitute 0.35 per cent of Australian school enrolments (up from 0.27 in 2008). This keeps the schools – both individually and as a collective on the margins.

For 2020, ACARA has data for **47 SEA member schools** educating **9,358 students** (52 per cent girls, 48 per cent boys) and employing **2,606 staff** across 810.9 fulltime equivalent (FTE) teaching positions and 513.2 (FTE) non-teaching positions. Schools are either primary ($n=17$, 37 per cent) or combined ($n=30$, 63 per cent) with 32 per cent ($n=15$) going to Year 12.

Using the Australian Statistical Geographic Standard (ASGS) categories, SEA members schools spread throughout Major Cities ($n=20$, 43 per cent), Inner Regional ($n=16$, 34 per cent), Outer Regional ($n=10$, 21 per cent) and Remote ($n=1$, 2 per cent).

² The other two being: International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (PYP) and Middle Years Program (MYP); and Montessori National Curriculum Framework.

³ Source: ACARA School Profile, 2008-2020 https://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/school-profile-2008-20208fce2e404c94637ead88ff00003e0139.xlsx?sfvrsn=3c5a4d07_0

Equity, excellence, and efficiency

Equity

Attending school is fundamentally important for student learning. The more a student is at school the more likely they are to make progress in their learning. For the SEA member schools the average student attendance level is 90.4 per cent of the time ($\sigma=3.16$, $min=73$, $max=95$, $\bar{x}=91$). This attendance level is comparable with government (90.7), catholic (92.4), other non-government schools (93.1) and just below the national rate (91.4).⁴

Not all SEA member schools provide senior secondary schooling. Based on the ACARA database, there are 15 schools who provide up to Year 12. Of those schools, ten have data on students completing senior secondary school and the number awarded the senior school certificate (see Fig. 2). Over the last three years (2017-2019), 711 have been reported as completing senior secondary schools at SEA member schools and 73.6 per cent were awarded the certificate ($n=523$). The annual rates for SEA member schools are comparable with national rates (2017, SEA=78, national =79; 2018, SEA=68, national=79; 2019, SEA=76, national=73)⁵ but prone to fluctuations based on sample size and differences in reporting.

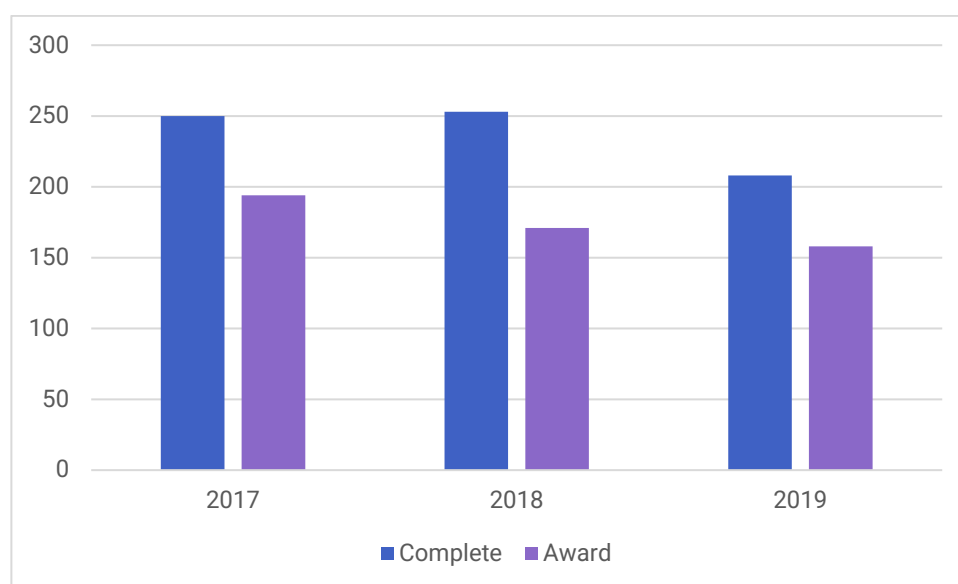


Fig. 2. Secondary school completions and award at SEA schools ($n=10$), 2017-2019

Of the 9,358 students attending SEA member schools, there is an almost equal distribution of boys ($n=4,495$, 48 per cent) and girls ($n=4,863$, 52 per cent). Across the schools an average of 4.7 per cent of students identify as Indigenous ($n=28$, $\sigma=5.1$, $min=0$, $max=21$, $\bar{x}=3$), and 14.4 per

⁴ See: [Student attendance \(acara.edu.au\)](https://acara.edu.au)

⁵ See: [Year 12 certification rates \(acara.edu.au\)](https://acara.edu.au)

cent have a Language Background Other Than English ($n=42$, $\sigma=8.6$, $min=0$, $max=35$, $\bar{x}=15$). Nationally, the average percentage of students identifying as Indigenous is 10.3 per cent ($n=7,994$, $\sigma=17.7$, $min=0$, $max=100$, $\bar{x}=4$) and Language Background Other Than English is 23.2 per cent ($n=8,720$, $\sigma=25.9$, $min=0$, $max=100$, $\bar{x}=12$).⁶ SEA member schools are less likely to have Indigenous and Language Background Other than English students than the average Australian school.

Generated from data on student family background and identified variables with the strongest association to student performance in national testing, ACARA developed the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The ICSEA has a national median of 1,000 ($\mu=1,000$) and a typical range from approximately 500 (representing the most extremely disadvantaged) through to approximately 1,300 (representing the most extremely advantaged). The average ICSEA for SEA member schools is 1,071 ($n=44$, $\bar{x}=1,071$, $\sigma=34.1$, $min=992$, $max=1,141$, $\bar{x}=1,071$). Figure 3 displays the average distribution of SEA member school families as a percentage across the quartiles (top, upper middle, lower middle, and bottom). SEA member schools are more likely to draw from the upper two quartiles than the average Australian school.

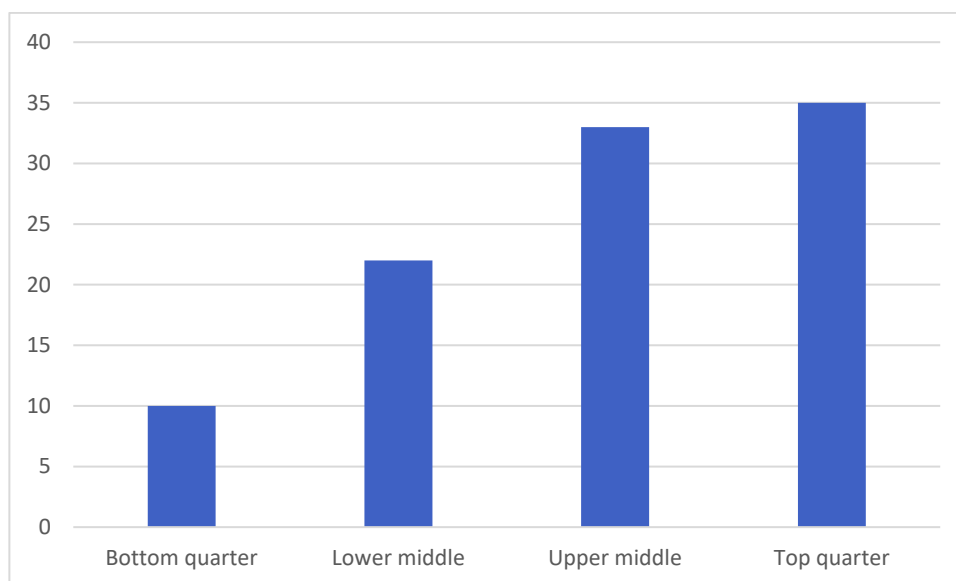


Fig. 3. Average ICSEA distribution (%) in SEA member schools

Excellence

As non-government schools, the viability and sustainability of SEA schools is dependent on enrolments. At its most basic, successful schools are those that can sustain sufficient enrolments to maintain operations. Synoptic data shows that SEA members have increased enrolments by 38.4 per cent since 2008. Figure 4 shows the enrolment figure for SEA member schools (mindful of changes in the number of schools) in the period 2008-2020.

⁶ See: [ACARA - Data Access Program](#)

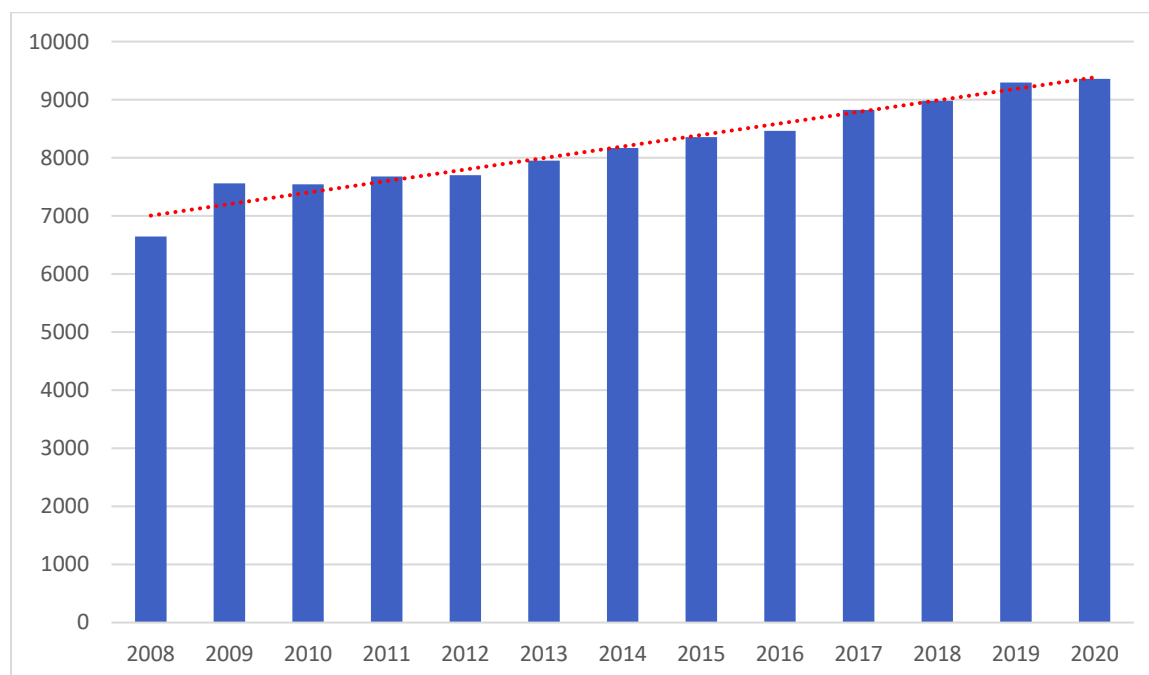


Fig. 4. Enrolment for SEA member schools 2008-2020⁷

Growth has been relatively steady over the period 2008-2020. A small number of schools ($n=6$) have fewer enrolments now than in 2008, but most Steiner schools have grown ($n=41$), with some new schools experiencing rapid growth – five at greater than 500 per cent, and the highest being at over 2,000 per cent growth. While this can be deceptive due to open with low enrolments, it is an overall positive sign for SEA schools.

A standard measure of success in schooling is through standardised testing regimes – both raw scores and student growth data. In Australia, the key approach is the National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). This takes place in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Using the latest data (2019), Table 1 displays 32 cells where is this reporting from SEA member schools on the MySchool website.⁸ The average participation rate for NAPLAN in these schools is 22 per cent (2019, $n=32$, $\bar{x}=22$, $\sigma=26$, $\min=6\%$, $\max=94\%$, $\bar{x}=42\%$). This is well below national averages (approx. 95 per cent).

Given the low number of SEA member schools undertaking NAPLAN testing, and the low participation rates among students within those schools, there are few claims that can be made and robustly defended about the performance of SEA member school students in NAPLAN.

This does raise a question about how the achievements of students at Steiner schools are publicly reported in ways that enable assessment of the performance of students and schools. A particularly important question in Australia given the investment of public funds in non-government schools.

⁷ See: [ACARA - Data Access Program](#)

⁸ See: [Home | My School](#)

Table 1. Percentage of occurrences where the percent of SEA students have NAPLAN progress above / well above comparable students of similar background and the same starting score.

	2012-2014	2013-2015	2014-2017	2015-2017	2016-2018	2017-2019
Year 3-5						
Reading	60% (n=5)	0% (n=3)	67% (n=3)	40% (n=5)	33% (n=3)	50% (n=4)
Writing	0% (n=5)	0% (n=3)	25% (n=4)	0% (n=5)	0% (n=5)	0% (n=4)
Numeracy	0% (n=5)	25% (n=4)	0% (n=3)	0% (n=4)	0% (n=4)	0% (n=4)
Year 5-7						
Reading	50% (n=6)	25% (n=8)	17% (n=6)	60% (n=5)	29% (n=7)	0% (n=25)
Writing	0% (n=6)	0% (n=8)	0% (n=6)	0% (n=5)	0% (n=8)	25% (n=4)
Numeracy	0% (n=6)	13% (n=8)	0% (n=6)	0% (n=5)	13% (n=8)	25% (n=4)
Year 7-9						
Reading	14% (n=7)	25% (n=8)	50% (n=8)	55% (n=9)	13% (n=8)	0% (n=10)
Writing	14% (n=7)	13% (n=8)	0% (n=8)	0% (n=9)	0% (n=8)	0% (n=10)
Numeracy	0% (n=7)	0% (n=8)	0% (n=8)	11% (n=9)	0% (n=8)	20% (n=10)

Efficiency

The Australian Government is investing more funds into school than at any point in history. As non-government schools, SEA schools receive funds through a combination of the Australian government; fees, charges, and parent contributions; State/territory government; and other private sources. Table 2 displays an overview of the descriptive statistics for recurrent funding (all sources) per student across SEA member schools with a comparative to associate schools (n=11). Using the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) data set, the national average recurrent funding per student is \$16,598.⁹ Not surprisingly, given their status as non-government schools and drawing on school fees, the average recurrent funding for SEA member schools is higher than the average Australian school. In total, approximately \$180m of recurrent funding (all sources) went to SEA member schools in 2019 (the last reported year).

Table 2. Recurrent funding (all sources) per student, 2019

Membership type	N	\bar{x}	σ	Min	Max	\bar{x}
Full member school	47	19,296	2,339	15,659	26,183	18,944
Associate member school	11	20,537	15,015	11,724	64,969	14,099

⁹ See: [School income and capital expenditure for government and non-government schools \(Calendar year\) \(acara.edu.au\)](https://www.acara.edu.au/school-income-and-capital-expenditure-for-government-and-non-government-schools)

With the growth in SEA schools there has been demand for capital expenditure. In the last three reported years (2016-2019) there has been approximately \$15.6m invested in capital works projects across SEA member schools. The average investment at the school level was \$331,204 ($\sigma=566,145$, $\min=57$, $\max=3,105,063$, $\bar{x}=105,272$).

An evidence void

Despite the wealth of publicly available data on SEA member schools, there remains an evidence void with implications for how Steiner schools are judged. Figure 5 below displays a data framework that maps UNESCO's Sustainable Development 4¹⁰ – ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – onto the data we have or do not have (marked in dotted boxes).

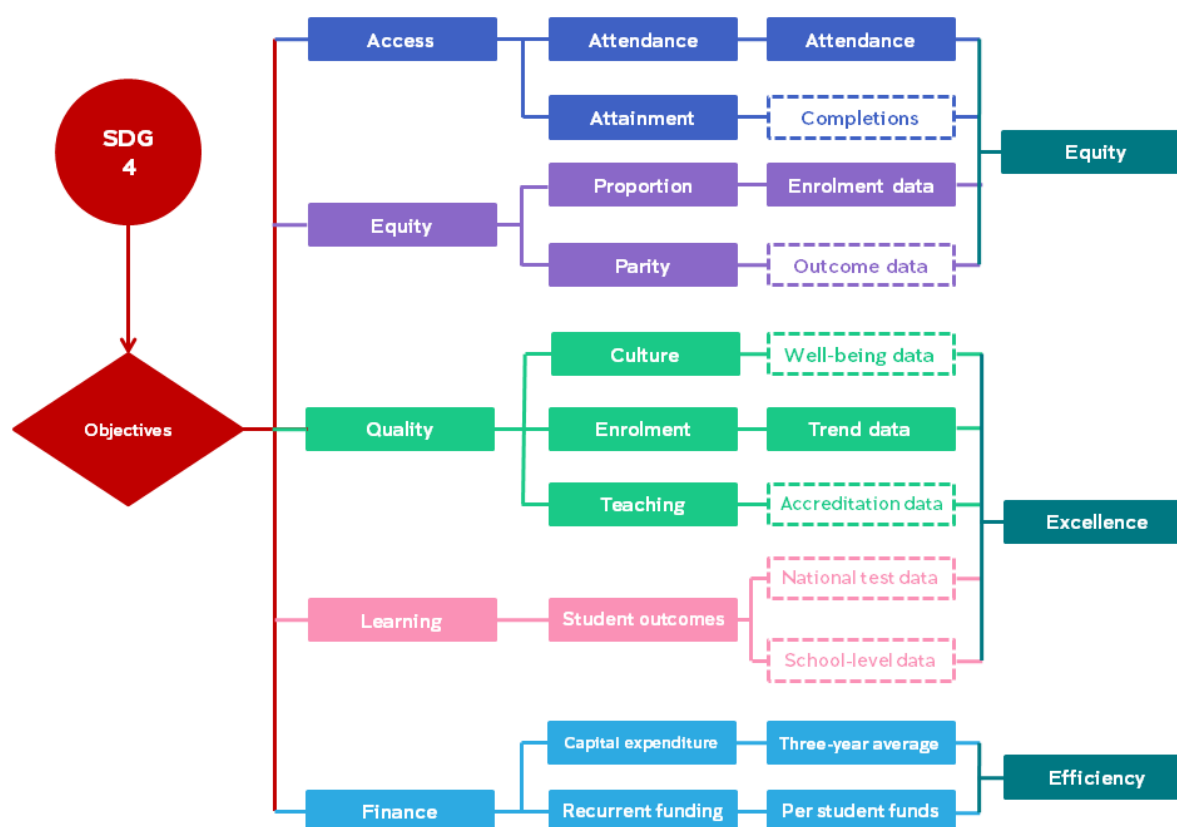


Fig. 5. Data framework on the equity, excellence, and efficiency of schools

The evidence void provides opportunities for others to impose judgements on the value of Steiner schools based on their own perceptions. In other words, in the absence of additional evidence to support the work of Steiner schools others will make judgements on them using their own criteria. To address this issue, at least as a first step, this project is undertaking a RIPS Analysis to inform ongoing renewal of Steiner schools nationally.

¹⁰ See: [SDG 4: Education | Global Education Monitoring Report \(unesco.org\)](https://www.unesco.org/en/sdg/4)

Relational Inquiry into the Provision of Schooling (RIPS) Analysis

The provision of equitable and inclusive education¹¹ at scale focused on encouraging and supporting every student to be the very best they can be, not matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face,¹² has been an enduring problem for government, systems, and schools.

Traditional approaches have focused on large-scale data sets to make claims concerning the equity, excellence, and efficiency of schools. What is missed in such approaches are matters such as the unique contexts of schools, their histories, culture, politics, social impact, and future trajectory. Drawing on the emerging field of relational studies, and particularly Eacott's *relational* approach,¹³ RIPS analysis seeks to fill this gap in how we understand schools and schooling. Figure 6 displays an overview of the RIPS process.

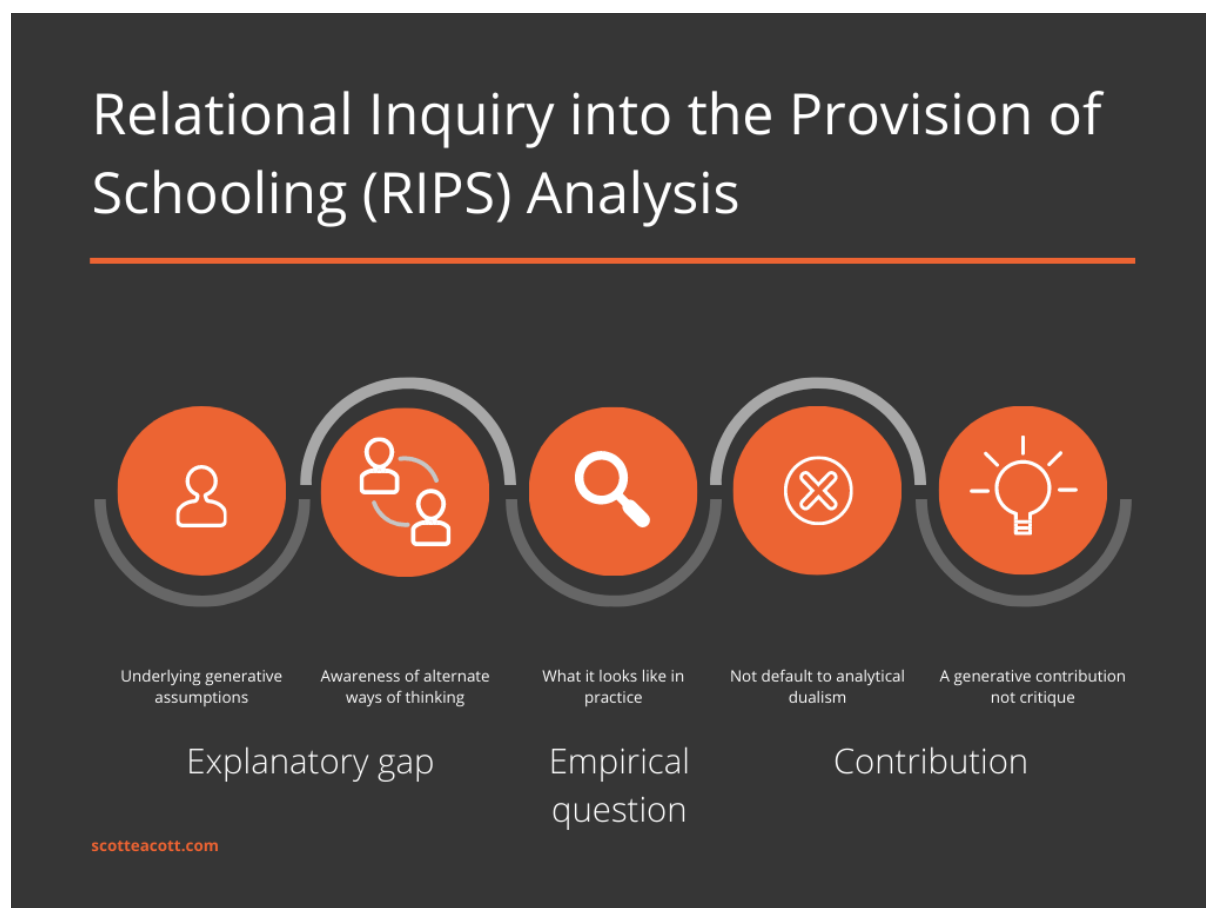


Fig. 6. Relational Inquiry into the Provision of Schooling (RIPS) Analysis

¹¹ See: [SDG 4: Education | Global Education Monitoring Report \(unesco.org\)](#)

¹² See: [The Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government \(dese.gov.au\)](#)

¹³ See: Eacott, S. (2018). *Beyond leadership: a relational approach to organisational theory in education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6568-2>

RIPS analysis, as applied to Steiner schools in Australia, pays attention to: i) the assumptions held regarding Steiner education / schools; ii) the diversity of perspectives on what is Steiner; iii) how those assumptions and perspectives play out in practice; iv) describing that practice without defaulting to judging right and wrong; and v) offering generative insights to advance the agenda of Steiner schools. Bringing this process into conversation with the intent of the project, it is possible to articulate a theory of change.

A theory of change

As shown in Figure 7, the theory of change is underpinned by the premise that developing greater clarity regarding what is Steiner education (at a school and SEA level) will lead to greater coherence in the operations of schools and delivery of holistic education for students. Additionally, it poses the greatest opportunity for crafting a persuasive narrative that is evidence informed of the work and impact of Steiner schooling.

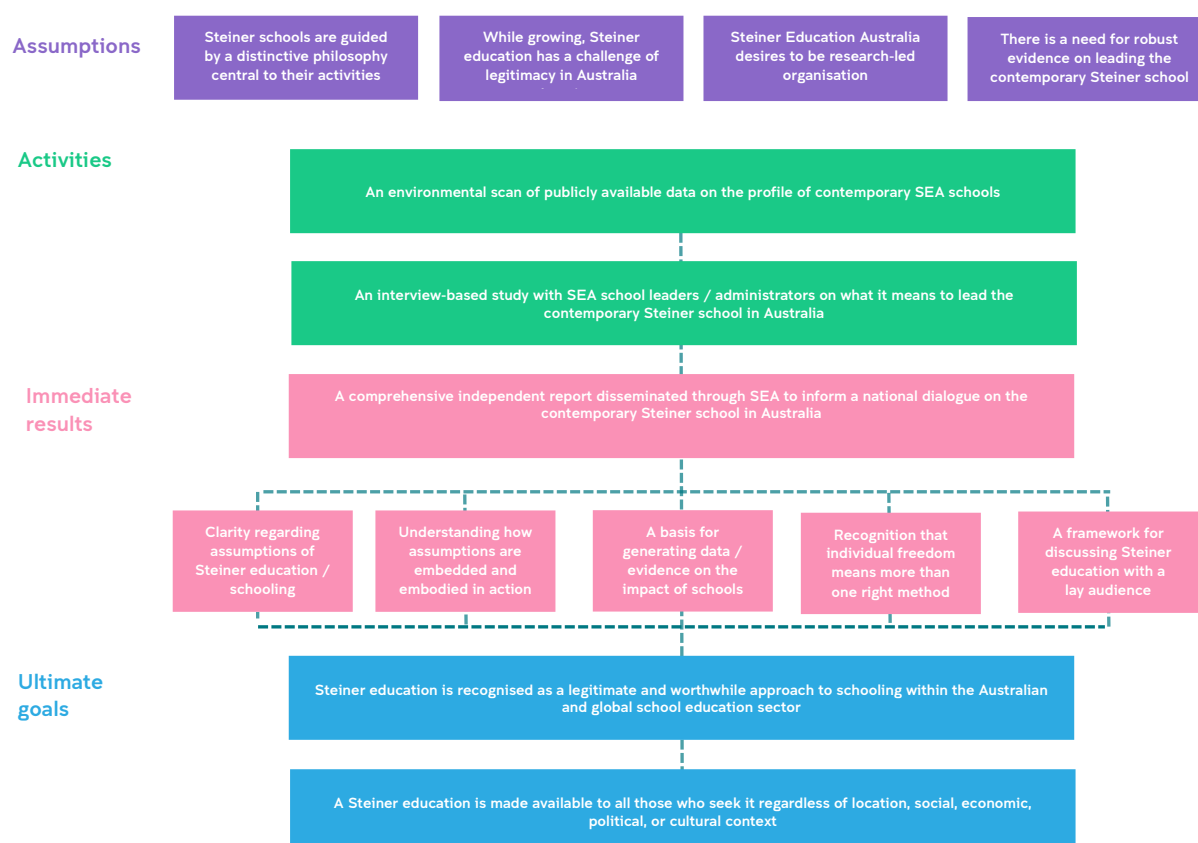


Fig. 7. Steiner Education Australia Leadership project theory of change

In collaboration with SEA and Steiner schools throughout Australia, this ongoing research is intended to re-cast Steiner education within the contemporary Australian school education context – beginning with a focus on leading the contemporary Steiner school.

Leading the contemporary Steiner school

Leadership and the role of the principal within Steiner schools is best conceptualised as the **curation of education**. Working with and across the areas of school governance, the College of Teachers, and the development of schools this curation is a dynamic and constantly unfolding activity aimed at advancing Steiner education.



Image 1. Children playing (Source: SEA)

Leadership

The idea of leadership and leaders in Steiner schools is an ill-fit. It is perceived as creating a potential hierarchy among school staff. As Participant 19 noted, 'getting leadership sorted out is a really big thing' for schools. So many schools have 'issues with disputes between boards, principals and the College of teachers'. The primary point of conflict is the respect for individual freedom in Steiner philosophy and the perceived decision-making authority of the leader or principal. However, a huge part of leadership is bringing people along with you [Participant 19] and it is not one person at the top making all the decisions [Participant 11]. What is distinctive in Steiner schools is that decisions made by leaders, however they are made, need to align with the Steiner philosophy [Participant 01].

The principalship

Not all Steiner schools have a principal. Other labels used in schools include educational 'administrator', 'director', 'manager' or 'head of school', but for an external audience (particularly for accreditation purposes), principal has the greatest utility [Participants 01, 07, 16, 17 & 19]. Although some perceive the idea of the principal as not consistent with Steiner's philosophy of self-administered schooling [Participant 18] the contradiction of Steiner being in many ways the first principal is not lost on all [Participants 08 & 11]. The presence of a principal does not negate the possibility of participatory decision making [Participant 22].

The regulatory environment of 2021 is very different to 1919 [Participants 05 & 07]. The contemporary oversight and compliance require someone in the role irrespective of the title [Participants 01, 03 & 04]. It frees up educators to focus on their teaching. The greatest challenge for principals appears to be in working with the College of Teachers and Board to execute their roles and advance the school [Participants 01, 04, 14 & 17].

The school board

Many Steiner schools grew out of the efforts of a small number of people or families within a community. However, this creates somewhat of a tension between what was done to get a school establish and then what is required to keep a school running [Participant 22]. In the contemporary Australian context, Steiner schools are an independent school and not a community school [Participant 03].

There is a business component to running an independent school. As Participant 18 notes:

... parents are not fond of (financial viability talk) because they do not like the business aspect of the school. They think we should be more benevolent, more like a charity. But I say we are not for charity. Even though we are not-for-profit it does not mean we should be operating at a loss every year. At some stage we would run out of resources and that does not make sense if you want to have a viable school. We have dreams, we have plans, but we do need to finance them.

The biggest downfall in many schools is the relations between staff, parents, and the board [Participant 08]. The functionality of the board, and its support for the work of the school is foundational to effective operations. This is shaped by the composition of the board. Apart from lack of experience or understanding of what it takes to run a viable operation, there is a perception that some parents seek board roles for personal reasons that have little to do with representing the parent or community body [Participants 08 & 15]. This type of action can undermine not just the board but also the work of the school.

College of Teachers

A College of Teachers is fundamental to Steiner's approach to schooling. The idea of a group (or even all) teachers engaging with one another in democratic decision making, study, and sharing of practice is a key cultural attribute of a Steiner school [Participants 01]. College meetings are an opportunity to be part of something bigger. A nurturing environment where staff look at what they are bringing to the students and learning from the collective [Participant 21]. It creates, and sustains, a sense of collective responsibility for the teaching and learning that takes place at the school and that of every student [Participant 15].

The College of Teachers is however problematic in some schools. Not so much the idea, but the practice. Despite claims of discomfort with hierarchy, the College – if exclusionary and only a select group of teachers – potentially establishes a hierarchy within the school [Participant 06]. The approach of having elders or experts, some self-appointed, can hinder dialogue and debate within a school / College [Participant 01]. This is not to say that College operates that way in all schools, nor to discredit the role it plays within Steiner schools, but it is not beyond critique. It can be inclusive and encouraging of growth for all [Participants 06 & 21] but can become a power base and source of clashes with principals and boards.

Development of schools

Many Steiner schools have various iterations of business or operations manager to support the development of the school. These roles are often fundamental during periods of growth (including establishment) and major capital expenditure [Participant 03]. Unlike the principal and College of Teachers, these roles are not necessarily education focused. At the same time, they are crucial to the ongoing education at the school and sustainment of a culture that is collaborative and always child-focused [Participant 19]. Understanding and appreciating the role played by these key administrative positions is crucial to smooth operations [Participant 03] but only possible with clear demarcation of roles [Participant 06]. The volume of regulation and compliance required of contemporary schools makes the Steiner ideal of self-administering educators untenable [Participant 18].

Curating contemporary Steiner education

Despite the ease of seeing the leadership of the contemporary Steiner school as the interplay of principalship – board – College of Teachers – development of schools, a more productive approach to reduce any perceived hierarchy in having a leader at the top is to instead focus on the relations among them. This relational approach is more consistent with Steiner-inspired philosophy of education and the collective responsibility of educating children. Rather than a focus on leadership, it is more generative to think of **curation**.

This curation is not about linear line management but instead the collective tending to how schooling is organised in ways that focus on children and what they need. It is not about power bases or sources of authority and instead working together, respecting individual freedom, yet harnessing efforts to deliver what is in the best interests of children.

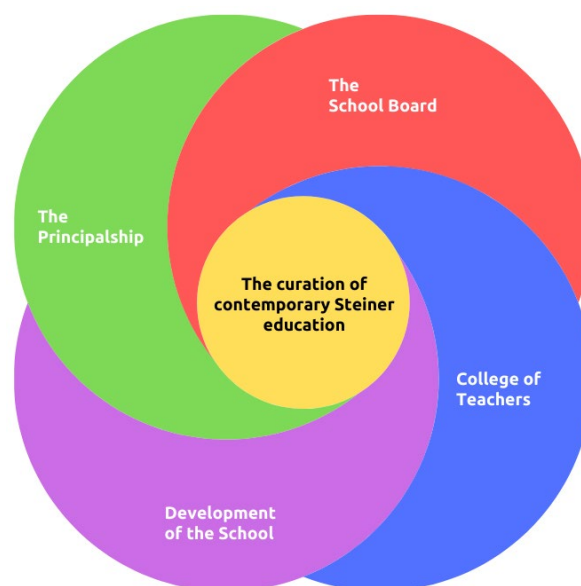


Fig. 8. The curation of contemporary Steiner education

Curating Steiner Education

*We need to look at our own issues really honestly.
Even if it is confronting. Unless there is a healthy
internal questioning and refreshing and transformation
we will no longer be relevant.*

Participant 01

Investigating what it means to lead the contemporary Steiner school has raised a series of topics that require further dialogue and debate within and across SEA schools.

All involved with Steiner schools share responsibility for engaging with these topics and thinking through the implications for the work of individual schools and all Steiner schools. The four topics are: principles or prescription; distinctions or difference; instruction for the 20th or 21st century; and enduring tension and pressures (see Figure 9).

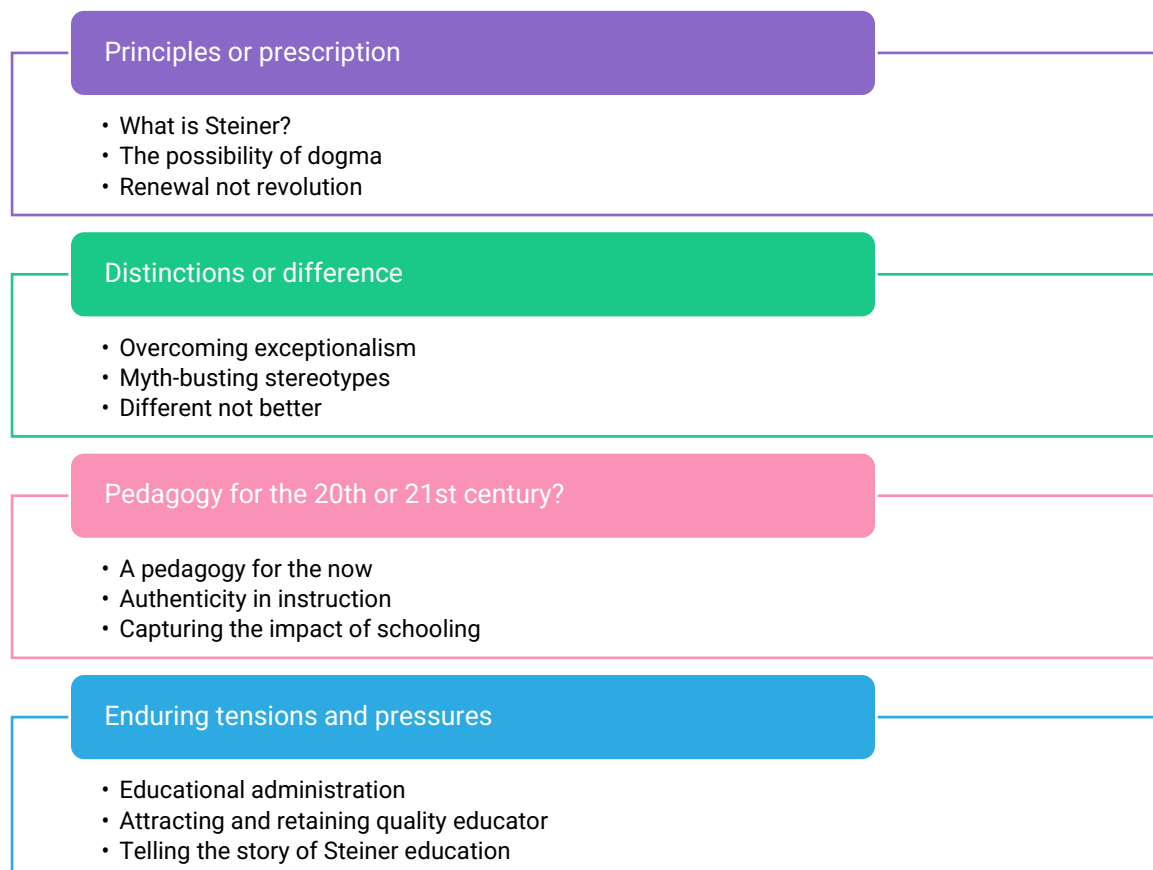


Fig. 9. Topics for dialogue and debate in SEA schools

In what follows, and without judgement, the four topics are articulated with examples from participants. This is followed by a series of provocations to stimulate dialogue and debate within and across SEA members. The report concludes with a summary of the findings.

Principles not prescription

Steiner Education Australia is a collective of schools rather than a system. Not surprisingly, across this collection of schools there is great diversity of approaches even if all aligning with a Steiner-inspired philosophy. As Participant 07 argued:

We do not try and compete with those other schools on academics or that narrow kind of we teach phonics or something like that. We really emphasise the whole child curriculum, the social aspect, reverence, student wellbeing, staying off screens and we carry it through. We try and compete on this, what does the child need, and we deliver it. We are a Steiner school.

As with all independent fee-paying schools, Steiner schools should be judged on how well they deliver on their stated philosophy [Participant 03]. However, clarity regarding exactly **what is 'Steiner'** remains contested with potential for **dogma** all set within the possibility for constant **renewal rather than revolution**.

What is Steiner?

There is no single version of a Steiner school. Throughout Australia, SEA member schools represent the full spectrum from traditional through to progressive [Participant 01]. All schools have their own unique histories and contexts [Participant 06]. Courtesy of a commitment to free education, apart from an underlying philosophy of anthroposophy, what it means to be a Steiner-inspired school ends up with its own interpretation at both a school and individual level [Participants 03 & 11].

Interpretation leads to diversity in Steiner schools. Each school has its own flavour. This can create confusion as to what is Steiner, what is Steiner-inspired, and importantly, what is not Steiner. For example, if one were to visit another school and upon seeing things done differently, does that mean that one of them is not Steiner? If so, what does that say about an education towards freedom? As another example, there is critique that the degree of regulation and compliance from external bodies such as the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) negates the possibility of 'any real Steiner schools' in New South Wales [Participant 14]. Importantly, who gets to decide what is and what is not Steiner remains an open question.

Steiner Education Australia has sought to address this concern through the development of the *Core Principles for Australian Steiner Schools 2021* (see **Box 1** below). While offering a key articulation of the constitution of a Steiner school, there is a possibility that in naming core principles they become a checklist or tick-a-box exercise. In doing so, while it might protect the Steiner label from those seeking to leverage it for personal, professional, or commercial gain, they may also become exclusionary and dismissing those deemed 'not Steiner enough' [Participant 14]. The challenge is therefore how to craft principles that do not become prescriptive.

Box 1. Core Principles for Australia Steiner Schools 2021

Version 1.0 June 2021

1. The recognition of the unfolding spirit of each individual informs all aspects of the school.

Steiner/Waldorf schools engage with contemporary insights emerging from Rudolf Steiner's indications about the unfolding human individuality. One core insight is that the individual is a threefold being of body, soul, and spirit. Steiner education seeks to enliven the life of feeling and thinking as well as physical, social, artistic, and spiritual capacities. As the individual evolves, they are able to impart meaning and purpose to their lives and creatively fulfil their unique potential.

2. Steiner/Waldorf education fosters social renewal by cultivating individuals who serve an ethical world future.

Steiner education is a world movement which promotes a spirit of universal endeavour and cooperation among all nations, cultures and identity groups. The schools strive to develop each individual's potential as a resilient, ethical human being who cares for the environment and has reverence for all life. Students learn from life and are enabled to contribute towards a world ethos upholding cultural diversity, equality of rights and economic sustainability.

3. Anthroposophical insights into child development guide the educational program and practice.

Steiner/Waldorf schools work with three developmental phases during which the physical, soul and spiritual aspects progressively integrate. Each phase has characteristic physical dimensions as well as a metamorphosis of capacities of will, feeling and thinking. The educational program is inspired by this living understanding and the collegial commitment to the role of teaching as an art in itself. Aspects of Core Methodology include: ·Direct experience informs the development of living concepts, particularly as part of the phenomenological approach to scientific study; ·Teachers give an overview of the whole, then move to the parts; ·Early childhood teachers enact play-based learning, the class teachers extend learning artistically and imaginatively and the secondary teachers cultivate aesthetic and ethical discernment; ·Goodness, Beauty and Truth are ideals that are embedded within the education; ·Imagination and creativity are nurtured through music, the arts and storytelling; ·Rhythm and repetition applied within the day, week and year are enhanced by a creative breathing dynamic within lessons; ·A focus on development of healthy life habits; ·Main lesson structure is employed over several weeks to facilitate deep learning; ·Observation is a key foundation for assessment; ·Individual 'Child Study' is a collegiate form of supporting each student; ·Being in Nature and using natural materials are valued experiences. Staff creatively strive towards ongoing deepening of Steiner pedagogy.

4. Steiner/Waldorf schools support creative freedom to teach within the shared agreements of the schools' collegiate.

The collegiate of teachers works collaboratively to develop, refine, and review the delivery of the educational program as the insights of the pedagogy are purposefully adapted to time and place. Individual teachers work perceptively and creatively with curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The teachers' spiritually reflective freedom guides their responsibility to each student, the class as a whole, and the school community.

5. The conscious establishment of human relationships fosters individual and community health.

The teacher's task is to develop a deep interest in the children, their colleagues, the school community and the world. Enduring relationships between students and teachers and among the students themselves are at the heart of Steiner/Waldorf education. The teacher's task is to strive with openness and fresh perspectives with each student and school community member. These relationships deepen and stabilise when they are cultivated over multiple years. Healthy relationships and communication with parents and colleagues, local communities and Indigenous cultures are encouraged for the well-being of the school.

6. Spiritual development for sustaining professional growth is an ongoing activity for the collegiate of teachers and staff and is supported by the board.

School staff cultivate their professional learning, including inner personal and spiritual development, drawing on anthroposophical and other relevant contemporary study and research. The shared agreements within the faculty around educational study, artistic activity, mentoring, research and reflective practice, are a source of insight and renewal which further personal and professional growth in service to the students. This collaboration extends to professional sharing among teachers and staff from all schools. The Board supports the provision of professional learning for staff. The Board also undertakes its own professional learning to maintain its alignment with the school ethos and vision.

7. Collaboration and shared responsibility provide the foundations of school leadership and governance.

While Australian Steiner/Waldorf schools are linked through an association of schools and their recognised Steiner Curriculum Framework, the governance, administration and decision-making processes of each school are independent. Schools cultivate a shared anthroposophical understanding of organisational principles for guiding the school in the following areas: a) The educational program is adapted by the collegiate of teachers to meet the needs of their school community in consultation with the pedagogical leadership of the school; b) administrative activities serve the educational program and its delivery; c) the board has guardianship role to support the mission and vision of the school, working strategically to enable the school's legal and financial health. Well-informed and effective governance is structured and implemented in a manner that cultivates collaboration among the organisational functions and groups.

The people who seek out Steiner schools do so because they are looking for something different [Participant 15]. For some, it is the Steiner philosophy, for others it is because their children might be the square peg in a round hole, and for another group, it is the pastoral care approach [Participant 19]. **Simply put, Steiner education is many things.**

Steiner education is more than just academics. There is an explicitly articulated focus on the whole child through the head, heart, and hands [Participants 13 & 16]. Recent market research for SEA found that 85 per cent of parents preferred Steiner schools for their focus on a well-rounded education.¹⁴ Educators in Steiner schools see themselves as contributing to generating a fairer and more compassionate world [Participant 04]. This is achieved through working service of the child, enabling them to be themselves to work positively and harmoniously within the community, to be in service to the world, and support the evolution humanity and social renewal [Participant 22].

Box 2. Steiner schooling in practice

Teachers at our school and the whole culture of our school is one that is very attentive to the needs of the individual students and the needs of the social fabric. We do not individualise learning from the start, but we are very attentive to the needs of the individuals, and we work them into a cohesive and supportive whole. The strong, caring and kind social fabric carries the children through a school that gives them that sense of security and a sense of belonging. If there is an issue, there is always someone children or you adults can speak to. The children are free to be themselves. They do not have to perform some role that they have seen on social media about what a 14-year-old should be like. They can really be themselves at our school and know they will be accepted, supported, and stretched too. We are very much into ensuring that there is no one cruising or underperforming. So that challenge. But challenged in an environment of respecting individual growth and development.

Participant 01

The potential for dogma

Spirituality, which appears in the *Core Principles for Australian Steiner Schools 2021*, is often a point of contention in the curation of schools. Participant 13 claims that 'you cannot be an educator in Steiner without a belief and commitment to the spiritual and blending the spiritual with the physical'. However, for some it raises questions about what is a Steiner school? For example, Participant 01 queries whether Steiner is a philosophy guiding the work of schools or is it a belief system? Across the interviews conducted for this project, there are diverse opinions on this matter within and across schools and it has implications for the relevance of Steiner schools in the contemporary education landscape.

¹⁴ Source: [Market Research - Steiner Education Australia](#)

As a guiding philosophy, Steiner's work provides:

a sound and practical basis for working with children, enabling them to find their creativity and to become free individuals who can think for themselves, make their own judgements and find their own purpose and direction in life.

The approach to education is based on reflection and research into Steiner's educational insights, specifically those that relate to child development. These form one aspect of what Steiner called 'anthroposophy', literally, 'human wisdom' or 'knowledge of the human being'.

Steiner Education Australia¹⁵

In contrast, as a dogma, Steiner – or an understanding of it – can serve as a mechanism for exclusion and dogma. Almost all participants made some reference to claims of 'That is not Steiner' being invoked to stop reforms or dismiss the practices of others (which is contradictory to Steiner goal of individual freedom). Significantly, though, despite the frequency of 'that is not Steiner' claims, there is very little of 'what is Steiner' [Participant 03]. Instead, claims are used to judge others or impose a particular version – even if shared by many – upon others.

Apart from stifling dialogue and debate within and across schools, a dogmatic approach to Steiner is exclusionary. Imposing a single version of what is and can be Steiner means that when confronted with two approaches one must be right (or at least more right) than the other and this is undesirable for schooling which aims to advance individual growth and creative freedom [Participant 11]. These exclusionary practices are often amplified by language and jargon which is not easily understood by those outside of Steiner education [Participant 17]. Curating education on the margins is difficult, distancing from others and creating divisions within makes it even more difficult. This is not about disregarding that which makes Steiner education distinctive, it is about raising awareness of when approaches stifle the very individual growth and freedom that is sought.

Renewal not revolution

The contemporary world is simultaneously an exciting and scary time for Steiner education. While there is growth across SEA member schools, there is a need to remain aware of and open to changes in wider society. As Participant 17 notes, 'unless we remain relevant, we will be left behind'. Evolving and changing with the times is not inconsistent with Steiner who did not want his approach to be static [Participant 18]. In doing so, it is about renewal and not revolution.

However, renewal and change are not necessarily ideas that sit easily with Steiner teachers [Participant 19]. Multiple participants spoke of how some staff – particularly long-serving – would hold back schools from renewal

¹⁵ Source: [About Rudolf Steiner and the growth of the Steiner/Waldorf education movement - Steiner Education Australia](#)

and asking questions about how contemporary Steiner schools can remain relevant and supportive of 21st century students. Change is very challenging in schools and in Steiner schools maintaining the traditional is pivotal to identity. However, what is being done in classrooms and around festivals is frequently done 'over-and-over-again' – with what is being done conflated with best practice without any recognition it is just one way of doing Steiner education [Participant 11].

As an underlying generative philosophy, Steiner has provided the pillars for schooling and all activities can be weaved around that foundation. Constantly asking whether what is currently done is serving children and the community remains ever important. If the answer is ever 'no', then there is an ethical imperative to no-longer keep doing it. Relatedly, there is the question of how do we know what is and is not working in our school [Participant 14]? Constant renewal is, in Participant 22's words, the spirit of Steiner. It was his intention. He never wanted things set in stone. Those educators who are being dogmatic are not actually following Steiner's lead. Renewal is not disregarding all that has gone before. Instead, it is about recognising that children and society are different in 2021 than they were in 1919 and thinking through how Steiner fits within current society.

Summary

There is great diversity of approaches within and across SEA member schools. This diversity is a strength and is to be celebrated in the pursuit of individual freedom. However, it can also be a challenge for a collection of schools to have a shared identity.

To this point, despite a rich history there remains some contestation concerning what is, and more importantly, what is not Steiner appropriate practice.

In the absence of a single agreed upon version of what is Steiner consistent practice, many – often self-appointed – educators impose a particular version on others. This dogma can be quite exclusionary and is somewhat inconsistent – unintentionally – with Steiner philosophy.

It remains possible for Steiner philosophy to evolve and renew without compromising its integrity. Maintaining a focus on what the child in front of you needs requires constant renewal to ensure that schooling meets the needs of the contemporary child.

Distinctions not difference

Governments do not make important changes, people do. Change happens when the community gets hold of it and a few bold people take it on and really understand that there is something they have to do – an opportunity to do it together and make a difference. I think that would be typical in a Steiner School, that people would feel themselves with a higher purpose in education.
Participant 04

Steiner schools are on the margins of school education in Australia. At 0.35 per cent of the student enrolment, they make up a small part of provision. This positioning as niche provider working at the margins amplifies the need to understand and be able to articulate what they do [Participants 03 & 07]. As Participant 14 notes:

We are definitely the alternative school in our community!

In crafting a narrative around the work of Steiner schools, vigilance is required to ensure that a degree of **exceptionalism** does not override the messaging and contribute to the many **myths and stereotypes** that dilute the work of educators. Rather than promoting themselves as better than alternatives, a more generative approach is to focus on the **distinctions** that a Steiner school offers without needing to dismiss alternatives.

Exceptionalism

In promoting themselves as providers of holistic education, there is a danger that Steiner schools set themselves up as the lone provider of such an education [Participant 01]. We know that such a claim is not only difficult to sustain but arguably untrue. Many, if not all schools would make some claim to developing the whole child.

While Steiner schools have a different way of working, educators who work very hard, a brilliant curriculum framework, and families who would not send their children anywhere else, it does not mean that other schools are of lesser quality or value [Participant 08]. Any sense of exceptionalism, or that other schools do not care about the whole child is unnecessary and not helpful to promoting Steiner education.

Never has this been more tested than with the current rise of Steiner-inspired streams in state (public) schools in multiple states. At approximately 10 per cent of the cost, Steiner streams in state schools provide the opportunity for families to engage with a holistic education without attending a distinct Steiner school [Participants 06 & 18]. Although not present everywhere, and mindful of the potential dilution of what it means to offer a Steiner education, the possibility of accessing a Steiner education outside of a specific Steiner school is a challenge to any sense of exceptionalism exhibited by Steiner schools.

Myth-busting stereotypes

There are a lot of misconceptions about Steiner education. Authors such as Stephen Saragin¹⁶, Susan Howard¹⁷, and Christof Weichert¹⁸ have explicitly written myth-busting pieces. Almost all participants spoke of the myths of Steiner schools and often the stereotype is far removed from the reality of what takes place in schools.

Stereotypes and myths about Steiner education often have their genesis in the experiences of some. As Participant 10 notes:

I think in a way many Steiner schools did not do themselves any favours in the early days. Many Steiner schools started in the 70s and 80s, especially in New South Wales even up until the 1990s, you did not actually have to have a teaching qualification to be a teacher. So a lot found their way into Steiner education that may not have helped build the image and profile as a professional schooling environment.

When identifying as a Steiner educator, it is not uncommon to be faced with comments such as 'you do not teach kids how to read, they just play, and it is all unstructured' [Participants 01 & 04]. Many in the community hold the opinion that Steiner schools are not an academic school and then get surprised when they visit and see the work that is going on [Participants 01, 04 & 21]. Steiner schools are serious schools with a more structured curriculum framework and approach to behaviour management than may be expected. Despite the stereotypes they are not a group of hippies just playing in nature all day. There is enormous rigour and commitment within Steiner schools, but they do reflect their communities [Participant 14].

In aligning with the culture of their communities, Steiner schools exhibit a different image of schooling. As Participant 17 says, 'we are not driven by test results.' The low numbers of schools doing NAPLAN and then the low participation rates within the schools doing it (2019, \bar{x} =22%, \bar{x} =42%), perpetuates myths about being non-academic schools. Similarly, the absence of technology – an issue that has been significantly challenging during the pandemic – fuels an external image of Steiner schools that is distinct from the experiences of those within school [Participant 17]. Steiner schools do English, mathematics, and science as per any other Australian (or international) school. The difference is Steiner schools do it imaginatively.



Image 2. Maths learning (Source: SEA)

¹⁶ Source: [Beyond Myth-Busting: Understanding our evolving relationship to Rudolf Steiner's educational work in the past, the present, and the future | What is education? \(ssagarin.blogspot.com\)](https://ssagarin.blogspot.com)

¹⁷ Source: <https://www.waldorfearlychildhood.org/uploads/Howard%20Article.pdf>

¹⁸ Source: [Rethinking the Threefold Division of the Main Lesson: Christof Wiechert | Waldorf Today - Waldorf Employment, Teaching Jobs, Positions & Vacancies in Waldorf Schools](#)

Different, not better¹⁹

Although classified as an independent or private school, Steiner schools are not your usual private school. As Participant 21 articulates:

If you go to Scots College, the students there, their academic success is amazing. No one can dispute that. But they also weed out the students who should not be doing Year 12 because they are not going to achieve academic success. They also steer the students, whether that is right or wrong, into subjects that they will excel in. Maybe that is a good thing, but we [Steiner schools] do not do that. We let students steer rather than us which means sometimes they do not do that well, but they do something that they love.

Steiner schools work for their students. But this is not for every student. They are still sites of learning and to learn requires a challenge. Students are still challenged and sometimes that learning can be difficult, even painful, because the whole process of acquiring new skills and progressing does not always come easily. Therefore, against the stereotype, Steiner schools are not simply in the business of keeping children happy – they are in the business of education [Participant 18].

The schools within SEA look different. For some, they are in heritage listed inner-city buildings, others in community halls opposite the beach, a number in rental properties while looking for their forever homes, and many located on scenic bushland settings. The genesis of Steiner schools is very much grounded in wanting something different. In stressing this difference by articulating what is distinct about the Steiner philosophy without needing to default to claims of superiority is a path to building bridges and respecting individual growth and freedom [Participant 01].

Summary

Steiner education seeks to be a distinctive approach to education. One that fosters the human spirit in children and young adults, allowing them to flourish in a holistic learning environment orientated towards moral growth, social consciousness, and citizenship.

There is a danger in promoting such an approach to assuming a sense of superiority or exceptionalism against other approaches to schooling or even claiming to be the only ones focused on such goals.

In addition, there are substantial myths and stereotypes concerning Steiner education in the wider community. Many of these are easily refuted through a visit or engaging with a school. However, such engagement with those outside the immediate school community is somewhat rare.

In telling the narrative of Steiner education it is potentially more fruitful to explain and show how as an approach it is different and not better than alternatives. One that will work for many, not necessarily all.

¹⁹ Source: Eacott S; Niesche R; Heffernan A; Loughland T; Gobby B; Durksen T, 2021, High-impact school leadership in regional, rural and remote schools, ROS ID: [1579587](#)

Teaching for the 20th or 21st Century?

There is widespread appeal for schools to evolve from the industrial or production line model to a more contemporarily appropriate approach. Steiner schools have a lot to contribute to this agenda with many of the ideas labelled 21st century skills such as creativity, imagination, and collaboration central to their approach for over 100 years [Participant 05].



Image 3. Main lesson (Source: SEA)

As such, it is timely for Steiner schools to articulate what it is they do and share how their approach is consistent with calls for **a pedagogy for today's world**. The strength of the approach of Steiner schools is grounded in the **authenticity of instruction** where learning is centred on the world of the child not that of the adult. That said, an enduring challenge remains in **capturing the impact of schooling** in ways that maintain the integrity of the Steiner approach.

A pedagogy for today's world

Despite its origins dating back to 1919, Steiner education is just as relevant today as ever. Major activities such as music, the arts, eurythmy, knitting, crocheting, and working with the hands have been argued by some neuroscientists to support children development.²⁰ Steiner pedagogy is at the forefront of such work [Participant 01]. With a strong foundation and explicit focus on soft skills including but not exclusively communication, being a good person, morals, thinking outside the box, making decisions, thinking of others, and creative solutions to problem solving, Steiner education meets the requirements of 21st century learning [Participant 10].

Teaching children to be kind, how to get along, developing independence, climbing trees, running downhill, taking risks, is all there in the early years and built on throughout schooling [Participant 05]. This developmental and personalised approach to teaching and learning is consistent with the goals and intent of major national policy statements such as the [2018 Gonski Report](#) and [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Declaration](#).



Image 4. Boys knitting (Source: SEA)

²⁰ Source: [Research on Brain Development | Waldorf Research Institute](#)

The [Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework](#) is one of only three alternate national curriculums. Pedagogically, the approach is highly relational with students working with teachers over multiple years [Participant 01]. In addition to working together for multiple years, the generally smaller schools (compared to state schools) and College of Teachers model leading to collective responsibility, means that students get a feeling that not only does their teacher know them, but they see them and acknowledge them in their learning journey [Participant 13]. Figure 10 below is a school-level scatterplot of students enrolled and the number of staff (both full-time equivalent) using ACARA school profile data.²¹ Across 47 member schools, the mean student to staff ratio is 11.6:1 ($\sigma=2.1$, $min=7.6$, $max=16.0$, $\bar{x}=11.7$), below the national mean of 13.5:1.

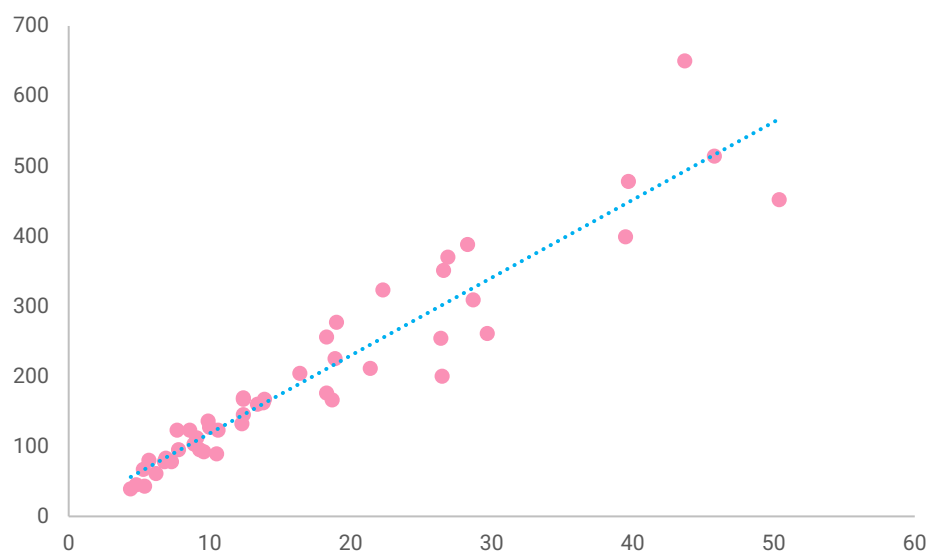


Fig. 10. Scatterplot of staff to student ratio (2020, $n=47$ schools)

Authentic instruction

Authenticity of instruction and making learning significant for student lives have been shown to positively impact on student outcomes – both academic and non-academic.²² Substantial attention has been given to Finland as a desirable model yet a lot of what is done there is already present in Australian Steiner schools [Participant 08]. Classrooms are based on dialogue [Participant 07], the curriculum unfolds in such a way that children have a broad knowledge of life [Participants 05 & 08], and assessment is constant without needing high-stake testing [Participant 01]. Not only is the learning rigorous and robust, but it is also grounded in being meaningful for students and their lives. For some, this is about studying the local environment, working with local experts (e.g., scientists) and monitoring the relational nature of the natural and social

²¹ Source: [ACARA – Data Access Program](#)

²² See: Newmann, F. M., Marks, H. M., & Gamoran, A. (1996). Authentic pedagogy and student performance. *American Journal of Education*, 104(4), 280-312. <https://doi.org/10.1086/444136>; and Quality Teaching Academy <https://qtacademy.edu.au/>

worlds and the importance of balance and health. It is also about making the teaching of school about what it means to be a community (see Box 3).

Box 3. Learning in, with, and for the community

A while back we had bushfires nearby and there was quite a sense of imminent threat for the community. It was not conducive time or environment for [regular] learning. So, we turned our attention to how we could help our community. We set up our kitchen and school grounds to make packs of sandwiches for the fire fighters – because heard that they were not getting any food. The kids formed a production line, making sandwiches of all different kinds, packing them up and the mums were making muffins and bringing them in, and we were making little lunch packs. The other children when they were not preparing sandwiches were sitting down making cards and drawing these beautiful pictures for the fire fighters that went into the lunch packs. Then we would do and do a big delivery. It was beautiful.

We had stories coming back to us of the fire service people just breaking down crying when they read the cards. When it was all over, they came to visit us at school. The captain came to personally thank the children and they were all given the opportunity to get in the first truck. It was a very special moment and real kind of greater connection to community through what we had done.

Participant 22

Capturing the impact of schooling

Despite the authenticity of instruction and contemporarily relevant pedagogy, visitors are often surprised by the 'quality of the work the children produce and cannot believe that it is possible for a school that does not do any real learning' [Participant 21]. Anecdotal evidence of alumni being highly desired by universities due to their inquisitive nature, divergent thinking, and articulate, ethical, and socially active manner [e.g., Participants 06 & 07] highlights an enduring issue for Steiner education – how to demonstrate student learning.

In the absence of large-scale testing regime data, coupled with claims of holistic education and doing more than just academics, **there is a need to find ways to make visible the learning of a Steiner education** [Participant 09].

Many schools have data on student learning. This may be from biannual screening or other forms of assessing student learning. Yet here is the challenge. In claiming to deliver on more than academic outcomes, it is possible to name them and generate evidence on whether students achieved them or not.²³ This data might not look like standard data, but it is

²³ Source: Ladwig, J. G. (2010). Beyond academic outcomes. *Review of Research in Education*, 34(113-141). <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X09353062>

possible. In the absence of generating such data, coupled with some vagueness around what those outcomes are, those external to schools will continue to impose measures of effectiveness on Steiner schools.

Summary

Steiner inspired pedagogy finds its genesis in the establishment of the first school in 1919. This rich history is both a strength and a weakness. The strength is founded on its long history in schools on a global scale. Its weakness centres on questions about how ideas from the 20th century relate to the contemporary world and the demands of the 21st century.

Contemporary calls for creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration,²⁴ have been and continue to be core to Steiner education. Increasing calls to move beyond industrial approaches to schooling and the search for alternatives means that Steiner schooling meets the requirement of 21st century learning.

Instructional practices that make learning meaningful and important to students' lives beyond the classroom are key to enhancing student growth and personal development. Making clear connections with prior knowledge, interests and the relations between nature and individual and collective lives is fundamental to Steiner education.

An enduring challenge for Steiner educators, as with educators in all schools, is how best to articulate the non-academic outcomes of schooling and providing evidence of that learning.



Image 5. Maths (Source: SEA)



Image 6. Students (Source: SEA)

²⁴ See: [What should students learn in the 21st century? - OECD Education and Skills Today \(oecdeditoday.com\)](https://www.oecd.org/education/21st-century-skills/What-should-students-learn-in-the-21st-century-2018-edition.pdf)

Enduring tensions and pressures

The COVID pandemic has created a tremendous opportunity for Steiner schools because across the world people are looking for something different. People are looking at their lives and not wanting the same. It is a wonderful opportunity to come in and say look, we are very holistic, we are very community based, we are creative, it is not all about tests and high scores, it is a whole kind of way of being.

Participant 16

No school operates within a vacuum. The internal tensions and external pressures constantly shape what is and is not done. As a collection of schools spread throughout Australia there are many issues that are shared including, but not exclusively **educational administration**, the **attracting and retaining of quality educators** and the role of marketing in **sharing the narrative of Steiner schools** to a wider audience.

Educational administration

Steiner schools need to remain vigilant with regards to the financial side of schools, including shifts in government (state/territory and federal) funding and the economies of their communities [Participant 06]. In addition, whether it is considered desirable or not, contemporary parents shop for schools, and Steiner schools need to remain as viable alternatives for families if they are to survive [Participant 21].

For a whole range of reasons, there has been many schools that have become compromised or even forced to close due to poor administration. Apart from the potential loss of a school, even if a school was to re-open or sustain operations, there is the collateral damage to students, staff, communities, and the larger reputation and image of Steiner education. Multiple participants spoke of what they perceived as 'dodgy practices' and suggested that perhaps more than other collections or systems of schools, Steiner education had too many examples of undesirable practices (e.g., Participant 07).

One tension central to this issue is whether you need a Steiner background to be involved in the running of a school. Participant 16 argues that 'you do not need a Steiner background; you need to know how to run a school'. This does not negate the need to work collaboratively with College of Teachers, Board, but indicating that the skillset is more important than experience with Steiner. This does highlight the key tension of remaining true to the philosophy but remaining viable financially [Participant 06].

Currently, most schools operate within their own bubble and in doing so are constantly re-inventing the wheel [Participant 07]. Even when hiring new staff, there is little cross-checking of references or past schools within the Steiner community. This is an opportunity for SEA to be more active in generating systems and structures to support the administration of schools.

Attracting and retaining quality educators

Unlike just about any other collection of schools in the country, Steiner schools face a unique issue when it comes to attracting and retaining quality educators. There is no explicit pipeline of teachers or leaders for Steiner schools, and the degree of turnover – particularly at the leadership levels – amplifies the issue [Participants 01, 03, 07, 14 & 22].

There is a desire to attract and then retain, high quality educators with not just a commitment to but experience with Steiner education – creating a tension regarding priorities. Participant 22, drawing on experience listening to founders of Steiner education in Australia, argues that:

It is always better to have a good quality professional teacher over an anthroposophist. The philosophy is important, and you must have commitment to it, but at the end of the day, a good quality teacher who has great relationships with staff, students, the community, will trump someone who is dogmatic.

Then adding that since shifting to prioritising quality over experience, they have experienced greater stability among staff and strength in the work of the school. This also negates the issue of where early career educators gain experience [Participant 01]. The people that choose to engage with Steiner schools, families and potential staff, arrive with an openness and commitment to being part of something more [Participant 04].

When quality staff are recruited, finding the best way to support and develop remains an enduring issue. Unlike other independent schools where there is a wealth of professional learning available, the scale of Steiner schools means less offerings and often, there is a belief that everything can be found within Steiner rather than looking broader [Participant 07]. Striking the balance between supports which envision and embody Steiner and integrate that within contemporary regulatory and economic conditions is key to optimising the work of SEA schools and the Steiner agenda.

Telling the narrative of Steiner education

Within Australian school education Steiner schools have been poor at promoting themselves [Participant 08]. Issues with expressing what they do to mainstream audiences [Participant 11] and in doing so, missing an opportunity to showcase how they can contribute to broader education debates. There is much to be done to better promote their work.



Image 7. Spring festival (Source: SEA)

Image is important to telling the narrative of Steiner education. Many of the schools, especially those on their forever sites, are beautiful locations. But it is more than physical beauty. For far too long Steiner schools has rested on the idea they are good schools, and that people will find that out for themselves. Steiner educators, Boards, and even SEA has been reluctant to get out there and say 'come and have a look at what we do' [Participant 21].



Image 8. Woodworking (Source: SEA)

Telling the story does require clarity around what is the narrative. Yes, it is about holistic education, the arts, well-rounded graduates, and the Steiner philosophy. But it is also about fulfilling the academic needs of students and catering for the needs of diverse groups of children and young adults [Participant 16]. Too much of the work of Steiner education takes place outside of broader discussions. There is a stereotype, but the schools are so much more.

There is an untapped resource is the alumni of schools. So many former students have remarkable stories of what they have done after attending a Steiner school [Participant 21]. Building relationships with those within and beyond the school is vital to spreading the word about the work of Steiner schools. What they offer is more than beautiful sites and artistic education. It is a coherent education based on a particular philosophy delivered by caring and professional educators committed to the cause.

Summary

Running a school, even within the networks of SEA, is difficult. Changes in the surrounding social, cultural, economic, and political contexts can cause fluctuations in enrolments and compromise the viability of schools.

The administration of a school under these conditions is challenging. It is difficult to prepare for, support others going through it, and also undertake the constant tending to – or curating – of relations among the board, College of Teachers, the development of the schools and of course students and families.

Attracting and retaining high quality educators to work in Steiner schools, as with all schools, is an enduring issue. Developing a supportive and appropriately resourced working environment is key to succeeding.

The above only matter if students continue to enrol. This is very much dependent on sharing the story of Steiner education with as wide an audience as possible.

Provocations

Research on alternate education providers is rare.²⁵ What there is, is often more advocacy than research.²⁶ As independent research – even if funded by SEA – this project has provided insights into leading the contemporary Steiner school. Specifically, it has proposed a re-casting leadership to the **curation of contemporary Steiner education**. In doing so, it has given rise to a series of topics that require attention and below are a series of provocations based on those topics.

For far too long Steiner schools have existed on the margins of the Australian school education sector. Plagued by stereotypes that are easily refuted, Steiner schools have a relevant and significant contribution to make to education within and beyond their schools and communities. The challenge is harnessing the collective wisdom of the schools to craft and share a narrative about the work of the schools.

An initial focus must be on how best to embed, embody yet constantly renew the principles of Steiner education without prescribing one right method of doing it.

To address the need for principles not prescription:

- How can SEA's *Core Principles for Australian Steiner Schools*²⁷ be used within and across schools to foster a shared understanding of what is, and is not, Steiner?
- What systems and structures are in place within and across schools to prevent individuals or small groups becoming the authority on what is and is not Steiner based approaches?
- What practices are in place within the school to ensure that approaches to teaching, curriculum and assessment continue to meet the needs of contemporary children and young adults?

It is difficult to be positioned as an alternate provider without constantly comparing to, or assuming to be better than others.

To address the distinctions not difference:

- Can you explicitly articulate what the purpose of the school is without referring to what others do not do?
- What strategies are in place, at the school or SEA level to speak back to myths and stereotypes about Steiner education?
- Can you explicitly articulate how the schools delivers on its intent without comparing it to others?

²⁵ See: Stehlik, T. (2019). *Waldorf schools and the history of Steiner education: an international view of 100 years*. Palgrave. Mills, M. et al. (2018). *Teaching in alternative and flexible education settings*. Routledge;

²⁶ As an example, see Dhondt, P., Van de Vijver, N., & Verstraete, P. (2015). The Possibility of an Unbiased History of Steiner/Waldorf Education? *Contemporary European History*, 24(4), 639-649. doi:10.1017/S0960777315000387; also [bill wood's research and bristol steiner free school – the ethereal kiosk \(wordpress.com\)](http://billwoodresearchandbristolsteinerfree.school-theetherealkiosk.wordpress.com)

²⁷ See: [Core Principles for Australian Steiner Schools – Steiner Education Australia](http://coreprinciplesforaustraliansteinerschools.com)

Steiner education has a long and rich history dating back more than 100 years. It is imperative to demonstrate relevance for contemporary times.

To address the relevance of Steiner instruction in the 21st century:

- In what ways can Steiner education be mapped against contemporary articulations of 21st skills to demonstrate its relevance for today and future?
- How can the authentic instruction of Steiner education be captured to generate stories of impact on students, families, communities, and the environment to showcase the work of Steiner schools?
- What systems and protocols can be established within and across schools to generate data on student achievement that speaks back to the data literate but also maintains the integrity of Steiner education?

All schools are subject to internal tensions and external pressures as they seek to develop their operations.

To address significant enduring tensions and pressures:

- What protocols and practices are in place to ensure the effective, efficient, and transparent administration of the school and its operations?
- Are there explicit strategies for attracting (including recruitment processes) and retaining (including professionally develop) high-quality educators at the school?
- What mechanisms do we have in place to generate information (including soliciting from appropriate community members) that can be shared to tell the narrative of the school and its impact on students, families, staff, and the community?

In advancing the agenda of the above there are questions to be asked of the role of SEA and independent (e.g., university) research for Steiner education in Australia.

To address the desire to become a research-led organisation:

- What is the preferred model of support from Steiner Education Australia from the perspective of those working within and across schools?
- How can independent research/ers be best utilised (and funded) to support the work of SEA and individual schools?
- If SEA and individual schools desire to be research-led organisations, how would we know when this has been achieved?

It is important to reiterate that the purpose of the above provocations is to support the operations of Steiner schools. They are not intended as an evaluative instrument, rather as a framing for reflection on and refinement of practice that best meets the needs of individual schools, communities, educators, and most importantly children and young adults. Any use for evaluative purposes has the potential to undermine the value of the provocations for supporting professional learning and dialogue.

Why it all matters

Australian students experience high, and growing levels of school-related stress,²⁸ often centred on national testing,²⁹ and with growing concerns over the level of screen time.³⁰ Steiner education represents a viable alternative. Steiner schools are based on children actively engaging in the life of their communities, learning through conversation rather than formal performance-based schooling, delay access to technology and mostly opt out of NAPLAN. In addition, the Steiner curriculum is one of only three frameworks recognised as equivalent to the Australian national curriculum.

Curation not leadership

Calls for leadership as the solution in education does not sit comfortably with Steiner philosophy. Instead, working with data generated with participants, Figure 11 presents a framing for the **curation of contemporary of Steiner education**. This concerns the collective tending of how school is organised to focus on children and young adults what they need. In doing so, it is less about authority and power and instead focused on working together, respecting individual freedom, and harnessing the efforts of all to deliver what is in the best interests of children and young adults.

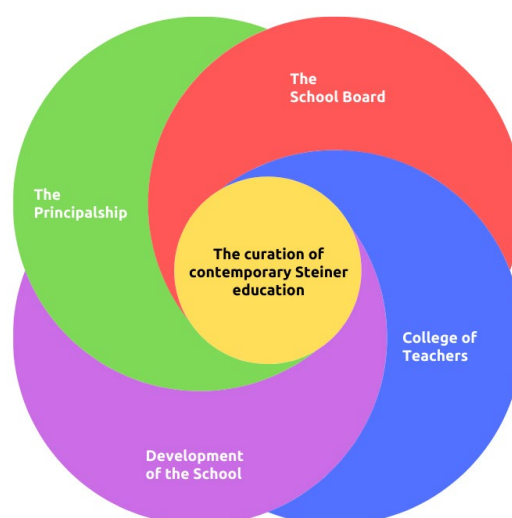


Fig. 11. Curating Steiner education

Topics needing attention

Curation alone does not address all issues for contemporary Steiner schools. A series of topics warrant further dialogue and debate within and across SEA schools.

Steiner schools have an underlying philosophy yet tread a fine line between principles and prescription . Defining what is Steiner without defaulting to dogma is healthy for schools and concerns renewal not revolution.	There is a danger for exceptionalism in claiming a distinct and not just different approach . Myths perpetuate about what is different that need to be exposed in showing difference not necessarily better.	2021 is different to 1919 so there is a need to articulate how the Steiner approach is teaching for the 21st not 20th century . Yet questions remain about how best to capture the impact of schooling on students.	Enduring tensions and pressures remain regarding the educational administration of schools, how to attract and retain quality educators, and how best share the narrative of Steiner education with a wider audience.
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²⁸ See: Thomson, S. et al., (2020). *PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's results*.

²⁹ See: Lingard, B. et al., (2016). *National testing in schools*. Routledge

³⁰ See: Coyne, S., et al., (2020). Does time spent using social media impact mental health? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 104, 106160

Steiner education is at its best when:

There is clarity of what it means to be a Steiner school, coherence in everything the school does with the version of Steiner education claimed and a strong narrative about the work of the school.	The pursuit of individual freedom is also granted to other educators and schools concerning what it means to be Steiner education and a collective responsibility to defend alternate interpretations.	Steiner pedagogy can be explained as relevant for the contemporary world and evidence generated to support the diverse academic and non-academic outcomes that students achieve at the school.	Steiner philosophy is brought to how schools are administered, quality educators are attracted and retained through supports and the story of the school is shared with a wide audience.
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What does this all mean?



Image 9. Wet felting (Source: SEA)

It is an exciting time for Steiner education in Australia. Enrolments are growing and new schools are opening into new territories. This excitement is tempered by enduring issues that require attention if they are to be overcome for the greater good of students, schools, and the wider Steiner education community. This research has started a discussion but is far from the final word. It is but the first step.

Where to next?

This report is intended as the next step in a national conversation about Steiner education in contemporary Australia. In addition to being distributed to SEA schools, it will hopefully serve as stimulus within and across schools for the purpose of refining and advancing the agenda of Steiner schools. In addition, there are plans to advance the research programs through case studies and further work with Steiner schools across Australia.



Image 10. Maths (Source: SEA)

Acknowledgement: Thanks to the SEA Board and SEA CEO Dr Virginia Moller for supporting and funding this research. Special thanks to the participants for their contribution to generating this report, without them this would not have happened. We hope we have given you voice.

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