Holistic Education and Visions of Rehumanized Futures[1]

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ABSTRACT. This paper reports the findings of qualitative research which investigated the views and visions of their futures of Steiner-educated senior secondary students in Australia. The students' visions of their "positive preferred futures" were strongly focused on social futures in contrast to the wider youth futures research, which demonstrated a stronger focus on techno-fix solutions. In exploring the human qualities the students thought they should develop to contribute to their ideal world in 2020, they identified such factors as more activism, more awareness, attitude and values changes, more spirituality and future care. The findings also showed that the students valued social equality, diversity, tolerance and community as important contributions to a peaceful, communicative world. Many of the students' preferred futures also paid attention to the needs of the environment, reflecting not just sustainable development but views that were closer to the eco-philosophers who argue for a re-enchantment of the world. In conclusion, there is an exploration of theoretical and practical links between the findings and recent speculations of educational futurists in regard to educating young people for the 21st century.

Keywords: Youth futures, holistic education, social futures, Steiner education, preferred futures

Introduction

The 21st century raises serious questions about the adequacy of contemporary mainstream educational theory and processes to equip youth to construct and face their futures positively. Key educational futurists have engaged in critical speculation about alternative forms of education which might better prepare youth for a rapidly changing and uncertain future, while also considering the needs of future generations. Several researchers recommend more holistic, integrated teaching methods using imagination, visualization, pro-social skills and specific futures methodologies (Beare & Slaughter, 1993; Bjerstedt, 1982; Galtung, 1982; Gidley, 2004, 2005; Gidley & Hampson, 2005; Francis Hutchinson, 1996). Intriguingly, many of these are crucial aspects of Steiner education.

Steiner education – an innovative alternative approach

Steiner education provides an integrated, holistic balance of intellectual/cognitive, artistic/imaginative and practical/life skills education. The possibility that such holistic, imaginative styles of education might facilitate more confident, proactive and hopeful outlooks towards the future provided the key focus for the research with Steiner-educated students discussed below.

Developed initially in Germany in 1919 by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), Steiner education has developed over the past 90 years as a large non-denominational international schooling system of approximately 1,000 schools, underpinned by a holistic, spiritually based philosophy. This approach can be historically contextualised in the post-positivist movement of the late 19th century, which was a response to the positivist scientific view of the world, which excluded notions of choice, freedom, moral responsibility and individuality. Rudolf Steiner (1861- 1925) called for science to be reunited with art and metaphysics through *spiritual science* (Steiner, 1928/1972). Steiner was a scientist, philosopher and artist who contributed significantly to the fields of

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education, agriculture (bio-dynamics), architecture, medicine and the arts. A futurist and grand theorist he had a macrocosmic perspective on time in relation to what he called the evolution of human consciousness and with great foresight he initiated the educational approach discussed here.

Underpinning theories

Underlying this approach is a holistic paradigm for viewing the world. The epistemological basis of the aesthetic, imaginative and holistic features of Steiner pedagogy is supported by art education theory. While this theory extends historically back to Plato (from a western perspective) it has been more recently grounded in contemporary art education theory which draws on developments in the cognitive sciences springing primarily from Gestalt psychology (Anderson, 1985; Arnheim, 1989; Broudy, 1987; Eisner, 1985; Read, 1943). The theoretical marriage of art education with Gestalt psychology has endorsed the value of the holistic, left brain/right brain patterning processes that enhance memory and learning through higher order meaning-making.

Speaking in 1922 of the qualities needed in education to prepare young people for the trials of the future, Steiner stressed the moral aspects of pedagogy:

> Pedagogy . . . is not merely a technical art. Pedagogics is essentially a special chapter in the moral sphere . . . only those who find education within the realm of morality, within the sphere of ethics, discovers it in the right way. (Steiner, 1967)

By contrast, the contemporary crises of youth have been referred to by Eckersley as reflecting "a profound and growing failure of western culture . . . to provide a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose in our lives, as well as a framework of values" (Eckersley, 1993).

While the deconstruction of the metanarratives of modernity by postmodernism has left a values vacuum for our youth (Gidley, 2005), Steiner education provides an approach which fosters a reinvention of human values to reincorporate the sacred. This approach is aligned to Thomas Berry's *post-critical naiveté*, Morris Berman's *participatory consciousness* and David Tacey's call for a *postmodern spirituality*, the impact of which will be evident in the students' visions (Berman, 1981; Berry, 1988; Tacey, 1995).

In addition, Steiner education, underpinned as it is by a holistic cosmology, and spiritually based ontology, regards recognition of the interconnectedness of all things as a way of knowing. This aligns it also with many non-western epistemologies (Nandy, 2000), which do not subscribe to the fragmented nature of learning underpinned by instrumental rationality. This recognition of the interconnectedness of all the discrete subjects is fundamental to the integral manner of planning of the Steiner curriculum (Gidley, 2007; Steiner, 1981).

Conceptual approach to the cultivation of imagination and will

The conceptual approach of Steiner education is an integrated approach to the development of the child as a whole. In particular, the cultivation of the students' imagination is considered to be a factor in helping them to envision prospective futures, which are different from the present (Nielsen, 2004). The foremost tool for the cultivation of the imagination in Steiner schools is the use of the story as a pre-eminent medium of teaching. Also the creative arts are widely used in Steiner schools to give deeper meaning to every subject and promote intrinsic motivation and positive self-esteem. The value of this approach to cognitive development, in particular the development of an allusionary base for finding meaning in life is supported by contemporary art educationists and psychologists (Anderson, 1985; Arnheim, 1989; Broudy, 1987; Eisner, 1985; Read, 1943). Steiner himself linked the artistic education of the child with the development of initiative:

> If, through an artistic approach, which appeals to the whole human being, we gradually unfold in our teaching what has become purely intellectual in the world, our pupils will grow into complete and integrated personalities, capable of developing real initiative. (Steiner, 1981)

Envisioning positive futures – social futures as paramount

Because of my interest and involvement in both Steiner education and youth futures research I decided to test speculations of educational futurists by researching the views and visions of young people educated in the Steiner system which, to my knowledge, was closest to the futures researchers ideal model. In this study, 128 senior secondary students participated, from the three largest Steiner schools in Australia (Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide). This article reports the Steiner students' visions of their futures, drawing on a combination of data sources and represents a qualitative analysis of their preferred or desirable futures across various themes. It was found that the Steiner students were just as inclined as other students and young people, as suggested in the wider research, to have grave concerns in terms of their expectations about the future of the environment, social justice and conflict. Paradoxically, in spite of this, as reported elsewhere, it was shown that unlike many mainstream educated youth, they were not

disempowered by those negative future expectations, but rather, demonstrated a strong sense of activism to create more positive futures (Gidley, 1998).

In addition, this article shows that the Steiner educated students have produced many very richly imaginative positive visions of their preferred futures within the general thematic areas covered by the research. In addition to the themes provided to them (the environment, social issues, and war and peace), the students' qualitative responses and visions demonstrated that they see the quality and character of humanness itself as a major factor in the challenges we face and also the futures they hope for [Note: students' real names are not used]. The preferable world they do imagine is one where human development, responsibility and action are at the forefront.

Human development as a basis for positive future images

When the students were asked to imagine living in the year 2020 when many of their hopes for the world have been realized, the positive changes they envisaged strongly centered on the importance of human development, with 75% of students citing some aspect of human development as being important. As the human development factor appears to be fairly unique to this research, a more in depth picture of the qualities the students described (activism, values changes, spirituality, and education for 'future care') will be presented below, through direct quotations from the oral and/or written responses of the students.

Activism
A rather impassioned plea for activism came from Katrina, an articulate, fully Steiner educated Year 10 student with German parents:

> Obviously most people hope that the world will improve by the year 2020, but whether this is realistic or not is up to us. Everyone is able to do something in thousands of ways but people don't seem to see that. They think that the problems are too great for them to deal with by themselves and so there isn't even any point in trying. I believe that we can do something and that it is in our hands to change the future of the world. I am personally involved with the third world organization called world vision and I have seen the difference that single people can make... So by educating children in schools about what they can and SHOULD do, more young people may take the initiative to act.

Katrina's comments are not only in sharp contrast to the youth disempowerment referred to in many of the other studies, but indeed give us insights into, and point to possible resolutions for, this crisis of confidence among many of our youth.

Changes in values
A similar depth of insight into the problems experienced by some of our youth today has been further demonstrated by two other girls. Cathy expresses her views about the benefits of Steiner education, in the following discussion of values:

> We need to start thinking on a global level, at the moment people are too tied up in materialistic values, which only lead to unhappiness. People are just starting to realize this, I think Steiner schools will prevail over the state system in the future. State schools are breeding unhappy work orientated materialistic machines.

The other year-12 student Jana, of Dutch parents, has attended the same Steiner school for over 7 years. Her visions for positive changes that would bring about her ideal future world show clearly how she sees that a change in values can precipitate actual solutions to the global problems:

> There is more overall acceptance and tolerance for people of colour, this has come about by realizing the importance of all cultures. There is less pollution as people are concerned with the environment, together we have made an effort to be less selfish and more aware.

Many of the responses categorized as being in the values area refer to changing attitudes. In a rather poignant statement of the seriousness of the issues involved and the urgency of the need for the attitude/values changes referred to here Joshua, a Year 12 student, reveals his anxiety about the very future viability of earth: 'The future of the earth depends on the attitude of the community (both local and global)…The question is whether this point will be too late or not?'

The ability of some of these students to see clearly that the fearful prospects for the future of the earth that they, like other young people, are able to see, can only be overcome by an urgent and vital need for us as humans to change our values to less materialistic ones, is a striking echo of much of the eco-theological and contemporary futures studies literature, and of course the spiritual scientific thinking of Rudolf Steiner himself.

Spirituality
The general category termed here spirituality may be particularly distinguished by terms such as 'be more aware', 'be conscious', and 'be awake'. Several other subcategories have been included under this general term.

Consciousness development.   The category of consciousness development represents the students' recognition that there is a mental or spiritual aspect that underpins their actions. The mention of the need for an increase in awareness was a frequent response in this and other responses. That this is a central or driving factor as a basis for education and action, is suggested by David, a fully Steiner educated year 11 student:

> I think it is very important to become aware and sufficiently educated in these topics, from there one can choose to tackle more active action.

Personal empowerment is a factor here, which indicates the students' awareness of the value of the contribution of each individual human being. It is well exemplified by Sarah, quoted earlier, who seems completely undaunted by the immensity of the global problems that have been identified by the students elsewhere:

> I can do everything in my own power to resolve my own conflicts peacefully and constructively and hopefully it will spread further. I can do good, be generous, do volunteer work for community health/charities and conscientiously make an effort to reduce my own and my families pollution and waste. I'd like to also go to a 3rd world nation and do all I can there.

On the other hand a number of students also suggest the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts so the individual empowerment is tempered with ***community empowerment*** issues rather than individual egotism or power-seeking. The need for a community effort is highlighted by Year 10 student James, who attended a religious primary school and Steiner secondary school:

> If everyone decided to do something about it then we could, but at the moment most people think it won't affect them. I think there are enough resources in the world to make everyone happy.

It is in the area of ***interconnectedness*** and respect for the sacredness of the earth (Gaia) that values begin most strongly to merge with the term spirituality. Sarah who spoke earlier on the need to start with oneself sees the environmental crisis as a springboard for spiritual development:

> Because of the environmental crisis, the world's people realized that we have to work together to maintain our livelihood and we all have much more love and less greed.

Other students also refer to a link between environmental crisis or even catastrophe and a resultant regeneration or development of spirituality. These intuitions of the students are intriguingly consistent with the literature on spiritual emergencies where individual spiritual initiation is often preceded by a crisis (Grof & Grof, 1989). Joseph, a fully Steiner educated Year 11 student, comes straight to the point, suggesting we need to "seek our meaning of existence to a greater level than now and search for true identity with the spirit." A similar scenario is envisioned by Kathryn, a Year 12 student who has been Steiner educated since Year 7 and wants to be a teacher or healer:

> I tend to think that some huge catastrophe is going to occur either natural or man-instigated (world war), which will shake everyone up. After that there will be a kind of golden age. I don't think regeneration (of spirit and land) is possible without some kind of stirring/shocking event.

The extent to which this vision of environmental regeneration is holistically linked with some sort of spiritual integration within human beings is articulated by Yolanda, quoted earlier. She is in her 12th year of Steiner education. Her vision of the positive changes needed for her ideal future world ensures that:

> Humans use their abilities to their full potential balancing out the way we 'think' with our minds with the 'thoughts' we receive from our hearts.

Education for future care is another emerging issue in the human development arena. It seems that one of the things that thinking about the future has induced for these students is the realization that 'the future' is something that needs to be addressed in schools. Alex, a Year 12 student who had a Steiner secondary and State primary education was quite emphatic in his view of future improvements in education, whereby "People are taught that as individuals they control the future."

Another fully Steiner educated Year 12 student Damien, became a little cynical in thinking about the importance of listening to young people's views about the future:

> The only thing that I can suggest is that people actually listen to what is being said by the young people of the day. After all we are the ones who have to put up with all the crap that older generations dump on us by not thinking of the future.

Social equality, diversity, tolerance and community

Almost two-thirds of the students (61%) regarded changes to the many social issues they cited as problems as being vital to the creation of what they saw as socially equitable futures. Among the changes the students envisaged as necessary if their ideal futures were to be implemented were:

- Less/no homelessness, 3rd world countries, hunger/thirst, poverty;

- no divisions according to race, class, gender, culture;

- political freedom for all and land rights for indigenous peoples;

- a reduction in health problems and social pressures.

Jana saw the need for a deeper analysis of the issues involved in order to create the more equitable future she envisaged:

There is less homelessness as we are coming to understand the real reason why kids for example run away from home. We are coming to the root of problems and working on building stronger foundation as a way of prevention, rather than solving problems on a superficial level as they arise… I believe that at the moment we are at a peak of self-centredness and everyone is fighting their own battle of survival. As this is a peak there must also be a decline, where people realize that it is time to work together, towards a whole.

This concern for looking more deeply and broadly at issues was shared by Paul who has attended Steiner schools all his life. His future vision requires: "a 'system' that encourages people to think who they are and why they are here (stop thinking so narrow and short term)". A Year 11 student, Shana, who has had a mixture of religious and Steiner education, decided to present her future visions in terms of two scenarios which describe how she sees issues such as homelessness and racism being resolved in the future.

Scenario 1: No homelessness: Many people didn't even have homes. By opening many homes run by caring people, which offered free healthy food and comfortable beds, financed by money which otherwise would have been used on ridiculously unnecessary things like road work that isn't needed, nearly ALL homeless people, young and old, have places to live.

Scenario 2: No racism: Classes were developed in every school that focused purely on racial difference and the problem of racism. Students were allowed to discuss opinions openly and were taught by intelligent knowledgeable teachers. Seeing as every child from a very young age grew up without purely prejudiced narrow-minded racist views, all great problems of racism faded away. Children with problems passed down from parents or developed due to a bad experience were counselled and given ways to deal with their feelings.

A peaceful, communicative world

Somewhat less confidence is demonstrated in terms of creating visions of futures without war and conflict. Little more than a third (37%) of the students were able to envision a peaceful future world. However, those who could envision it saw this capacity beginning with themselves. The importance of listening to the other person's point of view in resolving conflicts was particularly stressed in one of the Year 12 group dialogue sessions, where considerable discussion about the importance of relationships and dialogue in conflict resolution was encapsulated in the following comment by fully Steiner-educated Jake:

I think 'just relations' is the building block to everything - like communication and how you deal with people.

A more richly elaborated scenario depicting how peaceful futures might be fostered on a global scale is here developed by Shana, whose socially just scenarios were presented above. This 17-year old girl's vision, described below, of a peaceful world where global decisions are made collaboratively and in consultation demonstrates a wisdom that many political leaders could learn from.

Scenario 3: After much careful planning and deliberation, all world leaders and influential people met. A complete truce was called upon for this meeting even between warring countries. There were translators present and the leaders were made to listen to children and adults who had been decided upon before for having the best opinions and ideas, and an enormous agreement was made that all problems would be solved peacefully and without war. They realized how shocking and terrible and unnecessary it was for babies and innocent people to be killed brutally because of different religions or fights over land rights. Finally peace reigned and a few arrogant, blind, narrow-minded people didn't continue to destroy innocent lives.

Re-sacralising of nature and humanity

A unique and important finding was that none of the Steiner-educated students saw technology as being the savior in the future, as in Hutchinson's and other research where the way out of global crises into preferred futures for some students was into the 'passive hope of techno-fix' solutions or 'technocratic dreaming' (Eckersley, 1996; Frank Hutchinson, 1992). In addition, the Steiner-educated students are somewhat cynical about technology with some considering that technology needs to be "slowed down and people go back to basic living."

Images of sacred nature as contemporary (ancient) wisdom

The fairly typical 'clean, green and safe' images of future environmental health and cleanliness are found to a degree in some of the other research where young people's preferred futures are investigated (Eckersley, 1996; Hicks, 2002; Frank Hutchinson, 1992). The Steiner-educated students saw this as being related to "overcoming corporate greed" and "putting the environment in front of money." In addition, a small number of the students began to identify and describe, if somewhat tentatively, future images, which echoed a spiritual dimension only barely hinted at in the other research. Going beyond reductionist and materialistic terminology, the following statements indicate a deeper reverence for the earth, which is at least reflective of a Gaia image if not a sacred image of the planet.

- People have realized their connection to the world around them.

- We have to live for principles that are in harmony and respectful of the earth's existence.

- We have learned to live more in harmony with the earth.

The esoteric underpinnings of Steiner education, which incorporate an appreciation of epistemological interconnectedness, begin to emerge more strongly in the comments of Christina, a Year 10 student who has attended religious and Steiner schools. What she hopes for in the future is that "there is a greater respect for the four elements earth, air, fire and water and that they are seen as sacred."

Many of the students' visions of their preferred futures in relation to the environment parallel the recommendations of the growing body of eco-literature on the vital importance of reversing the destructive environmental trend in favor of sustainable development. Particularly interesting (in that they have not emerged from other research) are the students' visions, albeit a small number, which reflect images of "sacred nature." This somewhat romantic, idealist, even animistic view of the living environment is supported by an emerging body of literature which decries the environmental destruction which has resulted from three centuries of scientific reductionism and calls for a "re-enchantment of the world" (Mander, 1991; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). It should be noted also that some of this literature is remarkably consistent with the image of nature as inherently artistic, mysteriously alive and imbued with spirit, a view held by many indigenous epistemologies, artists and poets, and also reflected in the writings of such philosophers as Goethe, Schiller and Steiner (Steiner, 1968, 1983).

Utopian dreams and lessons

It might be cautioned that many of the visions presented above are utopian dreams divorced from reality or any hope of implementation. In fact one fully Steiner-educated Year 12 student, Melina, critiqued herself and balanced her own utopian vision in the following way:

> My imagined utopia, in which everything is perfect in everyone's eyes, would not have time to develop by the year 2020. Anyway I don't believe that it could ever be real because one can't live without some worries to balance one's life. However I believe that the situation in the world will improve and the problems that are now will be addressed.

A Year 11 student, Julia, who has also attended Steiner schools all her life also counter-balanced views of utopian possibilities:

> This earth will never become a place free of problems. That is not its destiny. This is a place where people come to learn and without problems we cannot do this. As the saying goes: Too much sunshine makes desert.

Human development for social futures

In addition to the somewhat ubiquitous positive environmental images that the students created, more uniquely, they invested considerable imagery in re-inventing human values. Three-quarters of the Steiner-educated students produced some kind of positive imagery in relation to how human beings need to change in order for their preferred future worlds to be created. This capacity to richly envision aspects of human development as part of futures visioning has not been demonstrated in other research with young people to my knowledge. Furthermore, it has been stated by Hicks (1996) that even in research of adult views and visions of the future the emphasis has been on technological rather than on social futures. He quotes Johan Galtung on the general gap in the futures research on anything pertaining to social futures:

> The future is seen in technical terms, not in terms of culture, human enrichment, social equality, social justice, or in terms of international affairs... People may think of social future but regard it as unchangeable. But it seems more probable that they have only been trained to think technologically and have no other type of thoughts as a response to the stimulus 'future'... [T]his will then become self-reinforcing since no one will be stimulated to think about social futures. (Hicks, 2002)

The extent to which the Steiner-educated students' visions also depicted socially just futures of equality and diversity, tolerance and community, further indicates that their capacity to envision social futures is quite strong. In addition, when they came to envisioning futures without war, the content of their visions primarily related to improvements in human relationships and communication, through dialogue and conflict resolution, rather than a passive peace image. Further suggesting a sophistication of social awareness rather than protected innocence, even their utopian dreams were full of dialectic struggle, as are those of futurist, Ashis Nandy, rather than a naive return to paradise (Nandy, 1992).

In summary, it is intriguing to compare the sense of responsibility that has emerged in these students' visions of their futures with what Slaughter refers to as "responsibilities of young people for the 21st century." He lists such qualities as:

- Looking beyond one's own personal needs

- Participating in the global community

- Acting as caring stewards of the environment and other species

- Acknowledging the rights of future generations

- Conserving and reinventing cultures

- Subordinating technical concerns to human ones (Slaughter, 1994).

In many respects the Steiner students demonstrate what could be called futures thinking or foresight, although they have not been formally introduced to futures studies education.

This research provides strong support for the speculation of educational futurists that an education that is more integrated, imaginative and proactive will better prepare young people for the future. The Steiner educational approach appears to foster in young people the ability to imagine positive social futures and the idealism and commitment to work for their creation.

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