# WINGS TO THE FUTURE
## The Steiner-Educated's Prospective Visions of their Futures*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper reports research which investigated the views and visions of their futures of Steiner educated senior secondary students using quantitative and qualitative methods.  The students demonstrated a strong sense of activism and self confidence and felt empowered to create their own preferred futures.  This capability is referred to as 'prospectivity' of futures visions.  In exploring the human qualities they thought they should develop to contribute to their ideal world in 2020, the students identified such factors as more activism, more awareness, attitude and values changes, future care and more spirituality.  A number of features of Steiner education are identified which might contribute to feelings of  empowerment in spite of realistic fears and concerns about the future.  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.

**Introduction**

Currently in Australia many youth are experiencing a range of crises (such as increases in youth unemployment, homelessness, chronic truancy, drug abuse and suicide), which may impact on how they think about the future [1-8]. In this context it is not surprising that recent studies with youth point to the emergence of feelings of deepening negativity, lack of hope, meaning and a sense of disempowerment in relation to the future [9-15]. The self-perpetuating possibility that negative views of the future might in turn lead to a further weakening of young people's ability to cope in their present lives is suggested by some researchers [16-18]. Though these studies and subsequent claims relate to the Australian situation, similar findings are evident throughout the western world [19-22]. By contrast, one of the planned outcomes of the educational approach that Rudolf Steiner introduced in Germany in 1922 was the quality of confidence [23, p. 79]. This confidence Steiner speaks of is in sharp contrast to the lack of self-esteem associated with much of the youth futures research [24, 25].

The present paper reports research, which investigated how an imaginative, artistic, holistic approach to their education empowered a group of young people to envision prospective futures, which they felt confident and proactive towards creating. The participants in the research were senior secondary students who had been substantially educated within the Rudolf Steiner schooling system in three major cities in Australia. Steiner education is an innovative, alternative educational approach that has developed over the past 75 years into the largest, non-denominational, independent schooling system in the world. It is based strongly on imaginative, aesthetic, holistic methods grounded in a comprehensive theory of human development.

**Steiner Education - Laying Foundations for a Futures Perspective**

Steiner education provides an integrated, holistic balance of intellectual/cognitive, artistic/imaginative and practical/life skills education. The conceptual approach of Steiner education is an integrated approach to the development of the child as a whole person, which includes a number of key factors, as summarised in Table 1.

*Alternative education theory as context for Steiner education*
Steiner education draws primarily on the child-centered approach, and respect for the individual, of the European progressive education movement at the turn of the 20th century, yet also embraces some of the ideals of classical humanism.

**Table 1    Summary of Key Features of Steiner Education**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1-3** | **I. WORLD VIEW –** | Microcosm/macrocosm. Environment as context. |
| | **Holistic Cosmology** | |
| **KEY** | **2.  PHILOSOPHY  -  Realist Ontology** | Wisdom of wo/man, values oriented, spiritual, ethical individualism |
| | **a) Anthroposophy** | |
| **THEOR-ETICAL** | **b)  Psychology** **- Theory of Child Development** **'Child Centred'** | Seven year stages of development relating to learning readiness - balancing of thinking, feeling and |
| **UNDER-PINNINGS** | **3. EPISTEMOLOGY - Integrated** | Interconnectedness of all things as a way of knowing |
| | **4. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH** **a)  Imaginative** | Cultivation of imaginative and visual thinking through stories and visual arts |
| **4-5** | **b)  Aesthetic/Creative Emphasis** | The arts as foundation for all subjects |
| **METHODS** | **c)  Active/praxis** | Practical approach to activities empowerment to action/ active hope |
| **and** {  | **c)  Contextual** | All subjects are richly contextualised historical time and geographical space |
| **IMPLEM-ENTATION** | **d)  Rhythmical** | Arrangement of content and processes with regard to the rhythms of nature |
| | **5. TEACHERS AND METHODS** **a.  Role of Teacher** | Kindergarten- role model (imitation) Primary - surrogate parent (authority) Secondary - trusted friend (guide) |
| | **b.  Teaching Methods** | i) Teacher as 'text' ii) Stories as central teaching tool iii) Student interaction- cooperative iv) Time-tabling - integrated, cyclical v) Technology - 'soft' not 'hard' vi) Materials - high quality, natural vii) Outcomes - capability |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **6-8** | **6. PARENTS AND COMMUNITY** | Practical and financial, sometimes philosophical |
| **SCHOOL** | **7. STRUCTURE AND DESIGN** | |
| | **a. School Structure** | Autonomous, flexible, vulnerable |
| **CULTURE** | **b. Architecture and Design** | Creative artistic buildings, equipment |
| | **8. ORDER VS MYSTERY** | |
| | **a. Celebration** | Celebration of festivals and respect for |
| | **b. Role of magic and Mystery** | mythological and esoteric/sacred |

∞                                                       ∞

The epistemological basis of the aesthetic, imaginative and holistic features of Steiner pedagogy are supported by art education theory which draws on developments in the cognitive sciences springing primarily from Gestalt psychology [26-31]. This 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.

*The cultivation of imagination as a 'Futures Tool'*
The active cultivation of the imagination so central to Steiner education is considered by futures researchers to be a factor in helping people to envision prospective futures which are different from the present [16, 18, 32]. In turn the vivid imagination of a desired future is thought to be a motivating factor in empowering students to create their desired futures [16]. 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. The rediscovery by some contemporary educationists and futurists of the importance of story-telling and myth-making also suggests they are keys to educational 'meaning' and the creation of positive futures [14, 33-36].

The creative arts are a pervasive media in Steiner schools which give meaning to every subject and promote intrinsic motivation and positive self-esteem [37-39][46-48]. 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 [26-29]. Steiner himself links 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 [40, p. 86].

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**Types of futures?**

Based on the work of Galtung (1982) and Bjerstedt (1982), the author argues that there are at least four ways that young people's views and visions of their futures may be oriented. Table 2 below demonstrates how these four future orientations may be related to the types of futures studies, and their underpinning paradigms. An analysis of the studies in the area of youth views and visions of the future indicates a striking gap in the research in that most of the studies are biased by their centricity.

**Table 2   Exploratory Typology of Futures Research with Young People**

| Broad Approach | Probable | Possible | Preferred | Prospective |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Description** | Trend analysis -global, g ical, | Imaginative, creative ideas, flexibility | Values position critical, ideological | Will to act, self-reliance, empowerment |
| **RelatedTypes of Futures Studies** | Predictive, quantitative, trendis destiny (One future) | Cultural-interpretive, utopian (Many | Critical, post-modernist, ideological (An 'other' future) | Creative, empowering, transformation -al (Futuring) |
| **Underpinning Paradigms** | Positivist empirical, analytical | Constructivist, interpretive, hermeneutic | Critical, emancipatory | Transformatio -al, activist, paradigm shift |
| **Research Methods** | Quantitative, forecasting surveys trend ırios | Qualitative, dialogues collaborative creative visions | Text analysis and critique of media, educ. artifacts, visioning | Combinatory Visioning, action planning, action |
| **Goal** | Generalisation extrapolation | Opening alternative possibilities | Critical awareness, deconstruction | Empowerment change, transformation |

**Adapted from** [11, 32, 41-46]

The literature is mostly representative of the middle range views of young people schooled in mainstream education and for the most part currently attending school or tertiary institutions.  Being within system and within paradigm they may represent what mainstream society and education promotes in the views of its young people towards the future.  The alarming degrees of negativity and powerlessness being expressed in the majority of studies of youth views of the future prompted some researchers to look towards ways of engaging active hope and empowerment [9, 11, 13, 15]. This led to an examination of empowerment research work particularly the futures visioning work of Boulding and Ziegler [16, 47].

**Methodology**

Aligned with the fourth type of futures studies research (futuring) in the above typology (Table 2), the combined approach to futures research attempts to establish a 'prospective' futures methodology that empowers through applying futures tools and methods to create positive futures. Creating an analytic 'dance' between the quantitative and qualitative data to search for links, this pattern-seeking draws on the aesthetic as well as the scientific thinking powers of the researcher.

The participants in the study were 128 students attending Years 10 to 12 in three established Steiner schools in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. There were slightly more females (54%) than males (46%), and more Year 10s (72%) than Year 11s (32%) or Year 12s (24%). The group overall had a very substantial Steiner education input with almost 60% having had a predominantly Steiner primary education, while as many as 90% had a predominantly Steiner secondary education. The first stage of the data gathering involved a survey questionnaire with both categorical and open-ended questions about their views of the future, the latter providing extensive, rich qualitative data particularly on the students' visions of their preferred futures. The second stage comprised two workshop sessions with all the Year 12 students from one school, and included group dialogue and visioning processes.

**Prospective Qualities In Future Visions**

Before examining whether the Steiner students' visions of their preferred futures could be considered to have a prospective quality, it needs to be noted that some major paradoxes emerged from the research. It was found that the Steiner students were just as inclined as other students and young people to have grave concerns in terms of their expectations about the future of the environment, social justice and conflict/violence. Yet in spite of this they were able to produce positive visions of their preferred futures. In addition, many of them seemed undaunted in their own will to do something to create their 'preferred futures'.

The term prospectivity may be described as firstly an ability to imagine a future that is different from what past and present trends might indicate ('temporal rupture') [48], and secondly, a strong enough will and action orientation to be able to put in place necessary changes to facilitate creating the future one imagines [32, 46].

**Pro-Social Skills**

In spite of the students' rather grim expectations with regard to the future prospects of an increase in wars around the world, they are committed to the view that it is vital to learn at school about peaceful ways of resolving conflicts both locally and globally. Further they consider that there is value in peaceful imaging of a 21st century world without weapons and wars. Along similar lines the students have strong views about the value of learning at school about possible ways of lessening the problems of hunger, homelessness and unemployment. They are also convinced that it is helpful to create positive futures images of a world without such problems. When it comes to considering proactive solutions to the environmental problems that loom so large in the minds of the students, the greatest proportion of students (98%) believe that it is important to learn at school about possible ways of lessening problems such as the 'greenhouse effect'. A very high proportion

of students (64 %) also consider that it is helpful to create positive images of a future world where polluted air, water and land have become things of the past.

## Prospectivity as Futures Creating

The ability to foresee a future that is different from the past and present is evidenced among the Steiner students in a comparison between the issues they cited as local and global problems, the personal contributions they feel they can make, and the changes they envisage in order for their ideal future world to be implemented. For the Steiner students, not only the order of importance of the issues but also the emphasis changed with the temporal perspective. This shift in emphasis and importance is summarised in Table 6 below. The change in priorities and perspectives between past and future images indicate the students can see a future that is different from the past. This demonstrates that they are capable of this aspect of prospective visioning of their futures, as a significant contrast to other research.

**Table 6 Comparison of Issues Considered Important to Steiner Students from the Perspectives of Past (Local/Global Problems), Present (Personal Contributions) and Future (Positive Changes needed for their ideal World in 2020) (N= 128)**

| Local/Global Problems (Past) | % citing | Personal Contribution (Present) | % citing | Positive for Ideal Future (Future) | % citing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Environmental Problems | 88% | Environmental Action | 52% | Environmental Balance | 76% |
| Social Injustice Problems | 59% | Personal Development | 36% | Human Development | 75% |
| Conflict/War | 47% | Social Action | 1% | Social Justice | 61% |
| Human Weakness | 29% | Conflict | 1% | World Peace | 37% |

**Source: Information from Tables 6.11, 6.12, 6.13 , [49]**

## Reinventing Human Values for Empowerment

When asked what if any personal contribution they could make to solving local problems, 70% of students felt they could contribute in some way. Interestingly, 36% of students saw their own personal development as a factor here, indicating a sense of personal responsibility for the problems,

linking it with personal empowerment.  A more in depth understanding of this factor will be found in Table 7 below.  Interestingly, the students identified personal and community empowerment and consciousness development as important qualities to be fostered.  These will be qualitatively explored below.  In their ideal future visions they also identified a quality that could be called 'future care'.

*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, a fully educated Year 12 student, 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 (Case 17, lines 15-22).

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 James, who attended a religious primary school and Steiner secondary and is currently in year 10:

> 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  (Case 107, lines 15-18).

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 questions. 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 (Case 34, lines 15-17).

A critical view of the responses above might consider it naive to think that the world's problems can be tackled by more awareness or consciousness, or even individual and group actions in the face of the immensity of some of the issues involved.  And how anyway might this additional awareness, and consciousness that drives the action be developed in humans today?  It seems that some students have given thought to these issues as well.  Kalia is a year 11 student with an Australian father and Maori mother who has been Steiner educated since the end of primary school and considers that 'Knowledge is a key link to awakening people to issues' (Case 33, line 15-16).

**Table 7  Personal Development as a Local Contribution to Problems (N = 128)**

| Personal Development Categories * | % of Students Citing | Properties of Categories |
|---|---|---|
| Activism | 30% | - becoming involved in everyday issues<br>- becoming involved with groups that address the problems<br>- there are thousands of organisations to join relating to concerns<br>- taking a personal interest, recycling, not using harmful sprays. etc<br>- do public talks on the subject<br>- lots of community work |
| Values | 26% | - do the right thing<br>- be a wholly good person |
| Spirituality | 20%<br>13%<br>6% | - Personal Empowerment<br>- Community empowerment<br>- Consciousness development<br>- Compassion |
| Education | 10% | - learn and practice knowledge<br>- educate others |

*  Listed in order of frequency, as measured by textual analysis of responses to open-ended questions using the NUD*IST qualitative analysis program.  NB These are not discrete categories, numericals indicating relative importance only and include some overlap.

***Educating Others:***  Of the thirteen students who identified educating others as an important way that they can contribute personally, Maree, who has been at the same Steiner school for her entire schooling, encapsulated how the personal contribution of one's own learning, action and passing on of experience can be a cycle of empowerment through action learning, that can improve the world:

Learn what we can so that we can practice our knowledge of these concerns and pass it on to others, gradually everyone will learn and the world could be a better place (Case 16, lines 15-18).

**Imaginative Education As 'Wings To The Future'**

Is it merely coincidence that the students who took part in this study are not disempowered by society's colonising images of a fearful or non-existent future for the planet, even though they too have imbibed these negative images?  If the only images that young people are receiving about the future are negative fearful ones then it is not surprising that they are feeling disempowered.  It is argued here that the active cultivation and positive nourishment of the imagination as an integral part of teaching methodology (as is practiced in Steiner schools) could have a long-term strengthening effect.  Given that all young people are constantly exposed to fragmented, violent negative imagery, the present findings support the idea that a strongly cultivated artistic imagination may buffer and counteract the negative.

The findings suggest that an educational style which contextualises information into a meaningful form through stories, and other integrated modes, contributes to the meaning-making capacities of the students, in turn empowering them.  In summary, the findings of this study suggest that in spite of the obvious power of the tacit negative imagery of our society's hidden curriculum, the balance provided by an active, consciously cultivated positive imagination in a young person can transcend the negative and even violent imagery.  This can motivate their will to action, empowering them to create their prospective futures.

**CONCLUSION**

There has been much concern in the literature about the extent to which young people generally seem to be disempowered by their negative views of the future.  Yet this study demonstrates that disempowerment is not a necessary consequence of fears and concerns about disturbing global trends.  It has been found in this study that educational input can potentially facilitate a positive, prospective outlook, thereby empowering students for their future lives.  This research demonstrates that it is vital that the current emphasis on 'head knowledge' in mainstream education be balanced in the future by

¥   the cultivation of the imagination through story telling and the arts;
¥   a reinvention of human values to include activism, spirituality, and future care

If we wish to empower young people to create their preferred futures, schools of the future would be need to be more holistic, artistic, imaginative and proactive.

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