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*'Embodied knowing': Exploring the founding of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner school in 1970s Victoria, Australia*

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## **‘Embodied Knowing’: Exploring the foundations of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School in 1970s Victoria, Australia.**

Education in Victoria, Australia not only underwent significant change in the 1970s, but was witness to a widespread educational reform project. Whilst exploration of the more widespread alternatives has been of some interest, the smaller progressive traditions that emerged in some ways ‘alongside’ the broader reforms have rarely been examined in any detail. This paper explores the founding of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School (MRSS) in the 1970s, the first of its kind in Victoria, and the third such school nationally. Analysis is based primarily on interviews with educators directly involved. L.A. Reid’s notion of education as an ‘aesthetic’ object, are drawn on to examine the collective experiences of the founders of the MRSS, and the particular expression they gave to Steiner’s educational ideas.

Keywords: Steiner education; Waldorf education; embodied knowing; aesthetic object; alternative education

### **Introduction**

‘It had a wonderful air of gypsy freedom to it’ recalls Elsa Martin of her first visit to the small, interesting looking school that had opened a few years earlier in her neighbourhood. It was the mid-1970s and she had been aware for some time of the opening nearby of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School, the first of its kind in Victoria. Being busy raising her children however, she had put off visiting the school, partly on the report of friend that it was as a rather serious place, and that she wouldn’t like it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elsa Martin, interview with Tao Bak, January 29 2016, Victoria University, HRE14-299. Note, the term ‘gypsy’ when used in Australia does not generally carry the negative connotations that it can in Europe, and is used here in a wholly positive manner. For a current overview of this schooling in Australia see *Steiner Education Australia*: <https://www.steinereducation.edu.au/>. For a brief centennial international overview see *Waldorf 100* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfec6eF4I\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfec6eF4I_4).

When Elsa did visit in person, a few years later, she felt instead as if she had ‘come home’. As she recalls, ‘Robert [Martin, founding class teacher] leapt down the steps, to interview me, he was barefooted, and I thought, “this is it”, and I really did fall in love with it’. Sagarin, examining the history of Waldorf education in that United States, has observed that a strong sense of connection or affinity is commonly cited among parents and teachers of Steiner education, and the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School was no different.<sup>2</sup> Elsa’s neighbour, Margaret Skerry, noted the lack of ‘clutter and mess’ in comparison to other schools she had visited, and the ‘lovely’ atmosphere – described as ‘quiet’ (rather than serious).<sup>3</sup> Like Elsa she decided to enrol her children, at least for the kindergarten year. In the end her two boys would stay through to the end of high school, and both Margaret and Elsa would become actively involved not only as parents and members within the school community, but as teachers also.<sup>4</sup> As with many who become involved in work that draws on the ideas of Austrian philosopher and theorist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the initial feeling of ‘homecoming’ preceded a slow unfolding; a journey into a way of educational and philosophical knowing, that would shape their subsequent lives in often profound ways.<sup>5</sup> Being a small school with an alternative philosophical outlook, it took a conscious choice to be involved, and not

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Keith Sagarin, *The Story of Waldorf Education in the United States: Past, Present, and Future*, (Great Barrington: Steinerbooks, 2011). The term Waldorf refers to the Waldorf Astoria factory that was the site of the first school, established in Stuttgart in 1919. Waldorf education is used in particular in North America. This paper will preference the term ‘Steiner’ education, unless context demands otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Skerry, interview with Tao Bak, January 29 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Skerry would some decades later also become a founding teacher at the Sophia Mundi Steiner School in Abbotsford, in inner Melbourne.

<sup>5</sup> As Sagarin notes in relation to those involved during the 1960s and 1970s, ‘in each case the person interviewed credits these experiences with profound changes in the direction in his or her life’ (my italics), *Story of Waldorf Education*, 73-4. On Steiner schools as sites for adult learning in Australia see Tom Stehlik, *Each Parent Carries the Flame: Waldorf Schools as Sites for Promoting Lifelong Learning, Creating Community, and Educating for Social Renewal* (Flaxton: Post Pressed, 2002).

everyone felt the same sense of connection. For those who made it however, it often became not only the start of a journey but a commitment; one which helped the school grow from its small beginnings, through some turbulent times, and on to become the largest, and arguably most influential, school of its kind in Australia.<sup>6</sup> As with all Steiner schools it was simultaneously an expression of a received set of principles and a unique expression of these principles, reflecting the people involved, the time, and the place.

This paper examines the founding of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner school in Victoria in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a view to tracing not only some of the key circumstances and people involved, but in capturing something of the experience of engaging, and giving expression to this particular body of knowledge by this group of educators, in this time and place. My interest is therefore less with institutional educational history in the first instance, and more with bringing into focus the felt experience of educators who worked with these alternative ideas, and exploring the implications of this as an ‘embodied’ form of educational knowing. In my attempt to achieve this I draw here on oral history interviews with eleven of the founding educators of the MRSS in addition to some documentary sources. Given the focus on the experience of engaging with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, I draw additionally on accounts from commentators and interpreters of the ideas of Rudolf Steiner in the interviews conducted by Jonathan Stedall for his 2012 documentary, *The Challenge of*

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<sup>6</sup> Alduino Mazzone, ‘Waldorf (Rudolf Steiner) Schools as Schools In The Progressive Education Tradition’ *Australia New Zealand History of Education Society Conference* (University of Sydney, 1995).

*Rudolf Steiner*.<sup>7</sup> In terms of analysis I draw on biographical sociology, as outlined particularly by Bertaux, in which ‘personal and social meanings, as basis of action, gain greater prominence.’<sup>8</sup> With links to narrative realism, biographical sociology is driven by an interest not in ‘explicating individual lives, intentions, or even heroics’, but more on ‘what people have done, where and when, with whom, in what local contexts’ as well as what has been done to them ‘and how they reacted’.<sup>9</sup> With an emphasis on ‘felt’ experiences as narrated to an interviewer, biographical sociology seeks to uncover patterns that reveal, amongst other things, ‘the social logics up against which people live their lives’.<sup>10</sup> Similar to oral history, biographical sociology often explores the lives of everyday people, or those whose voices are absent from mainstream accounts. In relation to my interest in capturing something of the experience of engaging with the body of knowledge in question I draw, further, on the implications of L.A. Reid’s notion of education as an aesthetic object.<sup>11</sup> Taking Reid’s notion of artistic endeavours as representing a form of ‘embodied knowing’,<sup>12</sup> I suggest that an examination of the experience of Steiner education thus conceptualised enables a foregrounding of the quality of those experiences for those involved, and for bringing this into focus as ‘the-

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Stedall, *The Challenge of Rudolf Steiner* (Cupola Productions, 2012). 26 full interviews available on Cupola Productions YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9RK5iSdC5vZxPPhK0tJOg>

<sup>8</sup> As outlined in P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, & T. Wengraf, (eds.). *The turn to biographical methods in social science: Comparative issues and examples* (Taylor and Francis, 2000): 1

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Brandt, *The rise of writing: Redefining mass literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 8

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Bertaux, and Catherine Delcroix ‘Case histories of families and social processes’, in P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, & T. Wengraf, (eds.). *The turn to biographical methods in social science: Comparative issues and examples* (Taylor and Francis, 2000) 71-89.

<sup>11</sup> L. Arnaud Reid, ‘Aesthetics and Education’, *Research in Dance Education* 9, no. 3 (2008): 295-304.

<sup>12</sup> Reid, *Aesthetics and Education*, 297

thing-in-itself', as Reid would suggest.<sup>13</sup> In doing so I propose finally that such a conceptualisation may have applications in educational historiography and the study of alternative traditions and practices more broadly.

Before turning to the founding of the MRSS I will firstly provide a brief contextualisation of education in Victoria in the 1970s. Following this, Reid's conception of aesthetic forms will be touched on, and a case for education conceived as an 'aesthetic object' made. The next section will give an account of the body of knowledge that informs Steiner education, Anthroposophy, in terms primarily of experiences of those who have engaged actively with this knowledge. My paper will then briefly examine the arrival of this knowledge in Victoria, Australia, before turning to the specific circumstances of the school itself, and the way in which these ideas came to be taken up and expressed by its founding educators.

### **Education in Victoria in the 1970s**

The election of the Whitlam (Labor) government in Australia in 1972, on the back of the compelling 'it's time' slogan, represented a clarion call for progressive thinking, and the 'opening up' of political and social life in a country seeking to shake off the shackles and constraints of cold-war necessity.<sup>14</sup> The combination of technological advancement, post-war economic progress, and cold-war tensions that had characterised the preceding decade had led concern regarding the direction of society on a broad

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<sup>13</sup> An attempt is made in this paper is to capture something of the aesthetic experience of Steiner education, with the aim of enabling the reader to begin to 'see' it, to some extent, for themselves.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Smith and David John Crossley, *The Way Out: Radical Alternatives in Australia* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1975); Susan Blackburn, *Breaking Out: Memories of Melbourne in the 1970s* (Willoughby: Hale & Iremonger, an imprint of The GHR Press, 2015).

scale. In Australian education, the international trends towards the reclaiming of both progressive and naturalist values in education, including the humanist role of education and the importance of connecting with and protecting the natural environment were felt,<sup>15</sup> along with the concern that the common modes of schooling were failing to meet the needs of students themselves.<sup>16</sup> In Australia these influences operated further within the context of the post-war migration boom, and the rapid expansion of secondary schooling.<sup>17</sup> As early as 1960 Ben Morris, visiting professor from Bristol University, in a broadcast on the ABC spoke of a new wave of progressive education that was part of ‘a revolt against instruction.’<sup>18</sup> Innovation in education became a focus of interest as the decade progressed, as did the notion of letting the community more effectively ‘in’ to schooling.<sup>19</sup> The Whitlam Government’s introduction of the Australian Schools commission in 1973, following the influential Karmel *Schools in Australia* Report<sup>20</sup>, led to an optimism and sense of possibility in education that was tangible. As Commission chair Ken McKinnon expressed it, ‘I have not since then seen a time in education of equivalent optimism and hope. People of all political persuasions were energised’.<sup>21</sup> Likewise Barry Carozzi remembers ‘a spirit of questioning authority,’<sup>22</sup> with a feeling

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony Potts, 'New Education, Progressive Education and the Counter Culture', *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 39, no. 2 (2007): 145-59;

<sup>16</sup> Julie McLeod, 'Experimenting with Education: Spaces of Freedom and Alternative Schooling in the 1970s', *History of Education Review* 43, no. 2 (2014): 172-89.

<sup>17</sup> W.F. Connell, *Reshaping Australian Education 1960-1985* (Hawthorn: Australian Council for Education Research, 1993), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Connell, *Reshaping Australian Education*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; David Pettit, *Opening up Schools: School and Community in Australia* (Ringwood Penguin Books, 1980);

<sup>20</sup> Peter Karmel, *Quality of Education in Australia: Report of the Review Committee*, (Karmel report, April 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Ken McKinnon, *The Schools Commission: A Review* (Melbourne University, The Schools Commission Seminar, Sept 3 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Barrie Carozzi, 'Livin' in the 70s, Teachin' in the 70s', in *Breaking Out: Memories of Melbourne in the 1970s*, ed. Susan Blackburn (Willoughby: Hale & Iremonger, an imprint of The GHR Press, 2015), 128.

that, in the words of (Steiner educator) Jennifer West, ‘that we [the younger generation] could do things differently’.<sup>23</sup>

In Victoria this sense of possibility was enhanced by the enthusiastic fostering of innovation by the Director of Secondary Education, Ron Reed who,<sup>24</sup> together with his counterpart responsible for technical education, Ted Jackson, introduced a policy wherein ‘each school was responsible for developing a curriculum that suit[ed] the particular needs of its students and its community.’<sup>25</sup> Innovations that resulted included the introduction of laboratory schools, such as Ferntree Gully, as well as lighthouse state funded alternative schools such as Swinburne Community College and Huntingdale Technical School.<sup>26</sup> Initiatives such as these, Carozzi suggests, led to a ‘sense of optimism, and ‘a belief that schools could become places of enlivened learning.’<sup>27</sup> At the same time the establishment of new independent progressive schools in Melbourne such as ERA (Education Reform Association), loosely based on A. S. Neil’s Summerhill school,<sup>28</sup> and the flourishing of existing progressive schools such as Preshil, likewise reflected the renewed interest in progressive educational initiatives.<sup>29</sup>

In examining the differing philosophies of the Swinburne and Huntingdale schools, particularly in relation to their interest in educational spaces, McLeod makes the salient point that while ‘progressive schools held certain radical ideas in common’ there were

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer West, founding teacher Mount Barker Waldorf School, interview by Tao Bak, September 11 2015, Victoria University, HRE14-299.

<sup>24</sup> RA Reed, ‘Curriculum Reform in Victorian Secondary Schools in the Late Sixties’, *Critical Studies in Education* 17, no. 1 (1975): 214-24.

<sup>25</sup> Carozzi, *Living in the ‘70s*, 131.

<sup>26</sup> See McLeod, *Experimenting with Education*, for an examination of these two state funded alternative schools.

<sup>27</sup> Carozzi, *Living in the ‘70s*, 132.

<sup>28</sup> See ERA School 1971- 1987, photo gallery and archival material, <http://www.era-school.net/>.

<sup>29</sup> See Naomi R. White, *School Matters: The Preshil Alternative in Education* (Port Melbourne: Mandarin, 1995).

also ‘important differences in philosophy and setting.’ Indeed, while the spirit of the 1970s as being counter to the structures of the time might seem familiar enough, there remain nevertheless ‘more challenging and more important questions about how to write the history of that mood and time in education once we move from generalisation to specific cases.’<sup>30</sup> In extending my examination to include the experience of Steiner educators in 1970s Victoria, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing examination of these complexities. While existing accounts mention Steiner and Montessori education during this period, neither approaches have been examined in significant detail.<sup>31</sup> The lack of detail on Steiner education evident in broader studies,<sup>32</sup> can partially be explained by the small numbers of the schools themselves during the 1970s. Only four Steiner schools existed in Australia by the end of the 1970s. Yet Steiner schools, like Montessori schools, have proved durable, with their expansion in ensuing decades suggesting a continued interest in their approaches and methods.<sup>33</sup> By the early 1990s approximately Australia was host to approximately 95 Montessori schools and 35 Steiner Schools.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Steiner schools this has grown to approximately fifty currently, in addition to numerous Steiner ‘streams’ operating as an option in state-

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<sup>30</sup> McLeod, 173.

<sup>31</sup> Some valuable theses notwithstanding, particularly Mowday, *Steiner Education in Australia*. As Mowday has put it ‘there is obvious neglect of Steiner Education, even in books on progressive education’. In part this has been remedied more recently by the introduction in 2012 of the *Research on Steiner Education Journal (ROSE)*.

<sup>32</sup> Such as Connell, *Reshaping Australian Education*, for example.

<sup>33</sup> The current paper is part of a broader study examining Steiner education as an alternative tradition in the Australian educational landscape. See Tao Bak, ‘Insider/Outsider Research on Steiner Education in Australia’, in *Mainstreams, Margins and the Spaces in-Between: New Possibilities for Education Research*, chap. 7, *Routledge Research in Education: 130*, eds. Karen Trimmer, Ali Black, and Stewart Riddle (London: Routledge, 2015). Ethics approval for the project was granted by Victoria University, HRE14-299.

<sup>34</sup> See Glennis A. Mowday, ‘Steiner Education in Australia: Maintaining an Educational Theory Given the Necessity of Practice, Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School, Sydney, 1957-2000.’ (MEd Diss. University of Sydney, 2004).

funded schools, the majority in Victoria.<sup>35</sup> Mowday in her account of the history of Glенаeon, the first Steiner school in Australia, suggests that one reason for the slower uptake of Steiner education in comparison to the Montessori approach is the tendency for Steiner educators to be ‘thinkers and philosophers’. As mentioned above, it is the experience of engaging with this philosophy that is a key interest of this paper, particularly in light of the fact that it is so often felt to represent something so qualitatively distinct by those that engage with it.<sup>36</sup>

### **The case for education as an aesthetic object, and Anthroposophical knowledge as an ‘embodied’ form of knowing**

As educationalist theorist L. Arnoud Reid has succinctly argued, ‘forms seem to be meaningful to us, and this is an aesthetic situation’.<sup>37</sup> Art, Reid suggests, in some moments calls for interpretation, and in other moments ‘says what it has to say in its own words, in its own form.’<sup>38</sup> By extension, he posits, ‘art experience is a kind of knowledge’ which is unique. And it follows that an aesthetic object is meaningful ‘not in that it points to something else, but that its meaning is somehow contained in it.’<sup>39</sup> A conceptualisation of education attuned to such distinctions, he contends further, allows for the acknowledgment of knowledge both as an abstracted set of generalised

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<sup>35</sup> See *Steiner Education Australia* for an Australian overview, <https://www.steinereducation.edu.au/>, and the *Waldorf 100* for a brief international overview leading up to the 2019 centenary of the Stuttgart school: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfec6eF4I\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfec6eF4I_4).

<sup>36</sup> When asked whether there was a sense of affinity with other progressive initiatives interview participants acknowledged the positive intentions of these, but maintained that Steiner education was their sole focus. As Pam Martin put it when asked if the group had felt an affinity with the nearby ERA school: ‘No. No, our entire focus was a Steiner school. You know, Anthroposophy.’ Pam Martin, interview.

<sup>37</sup> Reid, *Aesthetics and Education*, 297

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 299

understandings, and as the equally important individual ‘world-as-felt’, type of *embodied knowing* inseparable from the experience of art in the broadest sense.<sup>40</sup>

Rudolf Steiner shared with Reid an insistence on aesthetic unity, insisting that the observation that there is an aesthetic dimension to all experience holds significant implications.<sup>41</sup> The application of Reid’s distinctions, I suggest, offer the possibility for conceptualising the body of knowledge represented by Steiner’s ideas, known as Anthroposophy,<sup>42</sup> as itself an aesthetic form, through which an embodied type of knowing of the ‘thing in itself’ is distinguishable.

In his foundational work *The Philosophy of Freedom*,<sup>43</sup> Steiner sought to posit an epistemic foundation for the possibility of human beings to have free thought, as well as to initiate a new action.<sup>44</sup> As one interpreter of Steiner has put it, ‘the question of the world being unknowable’ as reflected in the influential modernist philosophy of Kant, was to him ‘just a misunderstanding of our relationship to the world’.<sup>45</sup> As economist Peter Blom explains, on a pragmatic level, in ‘most of the thinking now we exclude the

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<sup>40</sup> A distinction useful, he suggests further, in countering the type of one-sidedness and tendency towardness ‘second-handness’ that characterises much of education. *Ibid.*, 300. On embodied experience and learning see C. Kontra, S. Goldin-Meadow, and S. L. Beilock, ‘Embodied Learning across the Life Span’, *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4, no. 4 (2012): 731-9.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer M Gidley, ‘Educational Imperatives of the Evolution of Consciousness: The Integral Visions of Rudolf Steiner and Ken Wilber’, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (2007): 117-135.

<sup>42</sup> See Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophy in everyday life* (Steiner Books, 1995); P. Uhrmacher, ‘Uncommon schooling: A historical look at Rudolf Steiner, anthroposophy, and Waldorf education’, *Curriculum Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1995): 381-406.

<sup>43</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 7 ed. (Forest Row: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1964 [1894]).

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Robert McDermott, Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, Published February 14, 2013, Cuppola Productions, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q63R2WnG0bk>

<sup>45</sup> Interview with John Thompson, lecturer in education and former Steiner School teacher, Forest Row, England, Published Feb 14, 2013, Cuppola Productions, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39mSjIIPRpU>

human being, it's about the system. That the human being should fit into the system. And what [Steiner] did was say, "well let's take each human being as a starting point. Let's design something around that, [that] can work to serve human beings".<sup>46</sup>

For many who read his work, Steiner's philosophical outlook represents a paradigm shift that manages to steer attentiveness to the dynamic forces of life, while retaining the 'gains' of modernism.<sup>47</sup> In particular, the extent and manner in which the teacher can 'work on' themselves as part of the educational process is an integral component of the educational approach he Steiner outlined.<sup>48</sup> As Gidley has pointed out, Steiner focussed on the evolution and nature of consciousness, including not only how we can actively develop new stages of consciousness, but 'how we can educate for it.'<sup>49</sup> Ultimately Steiner's philosophy did not recognise an inherent split between the experience of the self, the experience of thinking, and a separate material world.<sup>50</sup> Pre-empting the later words of Reid, he presumed an 'interpenetration' between thought and the material, that is arguably surprising only in how long it has managed to remain thought of as separate, at least in the meta-level assumptions implicit in the dominant discourse, or language edifice, that has accompanied the project of modernity.<sup>51</sup> While Steiner's inclusion of

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Blom, Chairman of the Dutch Triodos Bank, interview, published Feb 20, 2013, Cuppola Productions, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noxTsabYv3g>. See also Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Jacob Sherman, Assistant Professor, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, published February 14, 2013, Cuppola Productions, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pESreAvrt1Y>

<sup>48</sup> See Rudolf Steiner, *Education as an Art*, ed. Paul M. Allen (New York: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1970)

<sup>49</sup> Gidley, *Educational Imperatives*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> And in this sense, by extension, an inherent aesthetic disunity. A distinction which chimes with Gregory Bateson's assertion; 'I hold the presupposition that our loss of the sense of aesthetic unity was, quite simply, an epistemological mistake' Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York, Dutton, 1979), 19.

<sup>51</sup> See Paul Hougham, *Dialogues of Destiny: A Postmodern Appreciation of Waldorf Education* (Malvern Hills: Sylvan Associates, 2012).

the spiritual dimension of life, along with the suggestion that thought itself could be treated as having the quality of a force in the universe has tended to be experienced as liberating and animating by educators and others who have engaged actively with these ideas, it has also led to his ideas being seen as somewhat ‘contaminated’ by the gatekeepers of late eighteenth and twentieth century cultural knowledge. As Hammer has suggested, ‘Steiner [represents], arguably the most historically and philosophically sophisticated spokesperson of the Esoteric Tradition, explicitly sid[ing] with Goethean science against the materialistic science of the majority of his contemporaries.’<sup>52</sup> As Wouter Hanegraaff has noted, the esoteric knowledge tradition overall has not fared well within the modern Western academy, being largely relegated to the category of ‘rejected’ knowledge, including, notably, through the mechanism of ‘ridicule’.<sup>53</sup> In attempting to reconcile the esoteric and modernist traditions, Steiner’s philosophical work tends to straddle fault-lines in ways that have not always sat comfortably, with family and friends of Steiner educators, for example, who have sometimes had difficulty comprehending its intentions.<sup>54</sup> There is no equivalent schooling within the Western tradition where the teachers are guided by the philosophy to work on themselves spiritually for example, whilst striving to ensure this activity does not ‘interfere’ in the day-to-day educational work in any overt way, so as to maintain an objective approach at all times. Meditative practice, now increasingly accepted within mainstream Western societies, through activities such as mindfulness was often treated with suspicion in the 1970s. As numerous interviewees have pointed out ‘it was much

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<sup>52</sup> Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge. Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, *Numen Book Series. Studies in the History of Religions: V. 90*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 329.

<sup>53</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Author in personal communication with Steiner educator.

harder to talk about spiritual things then, as there wasn't that atmosphere that there is now where lots of people meditate and there's a cultural recognition of the *idea* of spiritual things.'<sup>55</sup> In Victoria in the 1970s, indeed, 'the mere mention of the word 'yoga' was liable to cause someone to faint!'<sup>56</sup>

While the body of knowledge that outlined Steiner's ideas is characterised by a practical component, interpreters of Steiner often note the following qualities in his work:<sup>57</sup>

- its 'expansiveness of vision', in opening up areas of the human experience that attention can be fruitfully turned to;
- its complexity, in terms of the reading it calls for, representing both a performative and a demanding text;
- its rigour, in bringing together with philosophical seriousness both spiritualist and scientific traditions, or outer knowledge and inner experiences.

Given this characterisation, it is perhaps understandable that, as a body of knowledge, Steiner's ideas were ultimately taken up more within various practical fields, then in mainstream philosophical circles, in due course travelling a more circuitous journey as a global set of ideas, through networks of practitioners and enthusiasts, rather than the halls of the academies.<sup>58</sup>

Importantly, as one interpreter points out, inner experiences are not excluded for Steiner. 'For Steiner', Thompson suggests, human beings are beings that grow, develop,

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<sup>55</sup> Elsa Martin, interview.

<sup>56</sup> Author in personal conversation with Steiner educator.

<sup>57</sup> As represented in over thirty books and approximately six thousand lectures

<sup>58</sup> There are currently over 1200 Steiner schools and 2000 early years settings in a total of over 60 countries. Steiner Education Fellowship, March 22, 2017, <http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/>.

that transform; that evolve. That's their essence you might say, there isn't a human being that's just defined and static'.<sup>59</sup> Engagement with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, as suggested above, is often experienced by those involved, including Steiner educators, as different to the other forms of formal knowledge in their lives. Reflecting on the pragmatic nature of Steiner's ideas, Jacob Sherman has pointed out that it is sometimes difficult to know what to do with them, as one 'cannot sift through them like you would a text book'. It is challenging, he suggests...

for the reader personally, to... comport oneself in such a way, that what is being spoken about can be understood... it's a kind of reading that demands our participation. In academic language we talk about, it's a performative text. It's a text that you don't just mimic, or read off the pages. It's not just a representation of reality, but it's a text that actually has to do something to you. It does something to the reader. And only in that way is the text finally achieved.<sup>60</sup>

But, as he reflects further,

[Steiner] opens for me new possibilities that I hadn't considered before, but that are immensely fruitful to pursue... I don't approach Steiner as an authority, that he said this therefore it's true. Instead I see him sort of radically expanding the areas that I can look at. Before reading Steiner or some of his interpreters I felt like my vision on the world was much narrower where now... there's a whole number of new areas, a whole lot of rooms I never knew existed, that are very much worth thinking about.<sup>61</sup>

The energy of these ideas, and their ability to invigorate and animate those willing to engage with them, is often commented on. As Sherman has put it for example,

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<sup>59</sup> Thompson, interview, 16:16. For a discussion of knowing and becoming in a higher education context see Ronald Barnett, 'Knowing and Becoming in the Higher Education Curriculum', *Studies in Higher Education* 34, no. 4 (2009): 429-40.

<sup>60</sup> Sherman, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

I'm a philosopher by training, so it's not always clear where the authority for some of [Steiner's] claims comes from, and yet, the fecundity of his imagination, just the richness and the life of the picture he presents, I find so compelling, for thought... I don't want to say that I put Steiner as a poet, only, it's not just pretty pictures that one can feel good about, but there is this kind of *rich energising force* to the expansiveness of his vision. And the centrality of the human being, I think, relates to it.<sup>62</sup>

It is in this sense that the immediacy, the comprehensiveness (or holism), and the scope for an explicitly fuller, more conscious picture animates many Steiner educators who have identified with, and who continue to engage deeply with, the ideas behind the overall educational approach.<sup>63</sup> This was quite different to the assumptions underpinning the push for innovation, the interest in progressive approaches or the standard conventions of mainstream schooling at the time. As MRSS founding group member, Robert Martin recalls,

I was drawn to AS Neil, but then I read through the ideas and I thought... it's more a practice... it was more a wonderful system instigated by a very fine educationalist, but it wasn't really a philosophy, that I could perceive. There were philosophical threads behind it, but it wasn't a coherent system I felt. Whereas, as with all things Steiner he laid down an epistemology which I read and I felt was very sound. From that he laid out a picture of the human being and the ability of us to perceive one another and to perceive the world. From that he then developed what I thought was a sound educational philosophy.

As will be outlined further below, the fact that Steiner education did not necessarily represent something new was also an important component of the mind-set with which these educators approached their task. Indeed, when Paul Martin studied the teacher

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> It is not unusual for Steiner teachers to go through a phase of becoming evangelical about the approach they have discovered. Steiner educator Gregory Noakes, personal conversation with author, June 6, 2015.

development course in Stuttgart in the mid-1960s the city hosted two schools with over 1000 students, which had been in operation for approximately fifty years.

### **Arrival of Anthroposophical ideas in Australia, and the founding of the MRSS**

In Australia, Steiner's ideas were first applied in the arts and architecture, reflected particularly in Walter Burley and Marion Mahoney Griffin's intentionally designed Sydney suburb of Castlecrag in the 1920s. While the Griffins had not yet encountered Anthroposophy when designing the Australian Capital of Canberra,<sup>64</sup> their acknowledgment of the local natural environment already fitted neatly with Steiner's ideas, which they built on in later work. Another avenue was the introduction of biodynamic farming – a precursor to organic farming. As Paull has pointed out Steiner's Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG) – later to be termed biodynamic farming – membership included twelve Australians, among them Ernesto Genoni and Ileen McPherson who introduced biodynamic farming to Victoria in the 1930s.<sup>65</sup> Branches of the Anthroposophical Society had been formed in Sydney in 1922 as well as Melbourne in 1934,<sup>66</sup> with Genoni leading the Melbourne branch, known as the Michael Group, until the late 1960s, at which point educator and biodynamic farming pioneer Alex Podolinsky took over. Having arrived in Australia in 1949, Podolinsky decided to focus on biodynamic farming in Victoria rather than becoming involved in education. When Australia's first Steiner school was established

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<sup>64</sup> See Griffin, Marion Mahony, Walter Burley Griffin, and Anne Jeanette Watson. *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin: America, Australia, India*. University of Illinois Press, 1998.

<sup>65</sup> John Paull, 'Ernesto Genoni: Australia's Pioneer of Biodynamic Agriculture', *Journal of Organics* 1, no. 1 (2014): 57-81; John Paull, 'Ileen Macpherson: Life and Tragedy of a Pioneer of Biodynamic Farming at Demeter Farm and a Benefactor of Anthroposophy in Australia', *Journal of Organics* 4, no. 1 (2017): 29-56.

<sup>66</sup> Mowday, *Steiner Education in Australia*, 29; Paull, *Ernesto Genoni*.

near Castlecrag in Sydney, with support from architect, and colleague of the Griffins, Eric Nichols, Podolinsky turned down the opportunity to become one of its first class teachers.<sup>67</sup> Not long after assuming leadership of the Michael group however, Podolinsky, who had taught at the Freiberg Steiner school in Germany as a young man, turned his attention to education again.

Coinciding with Alex Podolinsky's assumption of the leadership of the Victorian Anthroposophical Society, a group of young teachers had begun meeting to study and discuss the educational ideas of Rudolf Steiner, with the ultimate aim of starting their own school.<sup>68</sup> Paul Martin and his girlfriend (and later wife) Pam had discovered the Anthroposophical Society as young university students in the early 1960s, and attended the regular society meetings of up to 60 usually enthusiastic attendees, in the dedicated rooms in Collins Street.<sup>69</sup> The education group,<sup>70</sup> including Paul Martin, Robert Martin, Ruth Wittig, Joan Bite, Tim Coffey, Pam Martin, Pauline Ward and Helen Cock, had met to read Steiner's educational texts, such as *Education as an Art* and *Practical Advice to Teachers*, as well as texts such as *The Study of Man*.<sup>71</sup> Tim had met Paul's brother Robert while studying at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (now RMIT University), where they shared a bond, amongst other things, as both having been conscientious objectors for the Vietnam war draft. Helen Cock was married to Graham, whose father was pioneering dietician Hainsworth Cock and whose brother, Peter Cock, was academic and founder of the Moora Moora Cooperative alternative community in

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<sup>67</sup> Alex Podolinsky, *Life, Contra Burocratismus*, (Powelltown, Vic: Alex Podolinsky, 2015), 33.

<sup>68</sup> A brief account is given in Mazzone, *Islands of Culture*, 39-45.

<sup>69</sup> Pam Martin, interview with Tao Bak, June 19, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Alduino Mazzone, 'Waldorf (Rudolf Steiner) Schools as Schools in the Progressive Education Tradition' (paper presented at the *Australia New Zealand History of Education Society Conference*, University of Sydney, July, 1995), 49.

<sup>71</sup> Tim Coffey, interview with Tao Bak, September 5, 2017.

Victoria.<sup>72</sup> Pauline encountered the group by referral from Hainsworth. Upon calling Paul Martin, Pauline recalls being asked ‘are you an educationalist?’, to which she replied in typical down to earth fashion: ‘I’m a teacher, if that’s what you mean.’<sup>73</sup> Ruth, who became the kindergarten teacher at MRSS, had met Alex Podolinsky as a result of teaching his son, Peter, at the local primary school.<sup>74</sup>

While Pauline remembers having difficulty making sense of Steiner’s writings and ideas initially, she soon saw them ‘lighting up’ in Robert, who seemed to have an ability to communicate them in accessible ways. Reflecting on this ability, she recalls having witnessed it many times in later years at information evenings, where he would provide accessible explanations like, ‘well, we might assess a child’s intelligence by the way he or she clammers over a log’.<sup>75</sup> Robert Martin, the first class teacher at the MRSS (an 8 year commitment, as the primary teacher traditionally follows the class through the primary years in Steiner education)<sup>76</sup> had often felt confounded by what he saw as a needless cruelty and notable lack of love evident during his own high school years, despite the best intention of most of the teachers. As a teaching student he came to the attention of his lecturer, Adrian May, by consistently challenging him on the principles he felt should underpin education. This included handing him lists of the top hundred books that should be read to inform one’s educational practice, and protesting when the student teachers were shown how to conduct exams by standing up in the lecture theatre and asking the lecturer to notice the stifling change in atmosphere that even the mock

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<sup>72</sup> See Peter Cock, *Alternative Australia: Communities of the Future?* (Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1979).

<sup>73</sup> Pauline Ward, interview with Tao Bak, May 5, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Podolinsky, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Martin, interview with Tao Bak, May 5, 2015

<sup>76</sup> Also known as ‘looping’ this tradition is commonly, although not always, followed in Steiner schools in Australia, adherence to this tradition can vary significantly among Steiner schools internationally.

examinations had brought about.

Later when visiting him at Box Hill High School, May would rarely find Martin in the classroom, having taken his students outside to study by the creek, or to engage in an exercise whereby they had to put on various coloured glasses, and to chronicle what they subsequently observed of the world. From the beginning this ‘upstart’, as May jovially puts it, had appeared to be ‘inspired’, talking repeatedly of ‘this school he was going to build’. Impressed, May subsequently enrolled his own children in the school, driving long distances to ensure they could attend, and later becoming a class teacher there himself. For May the school represented everything he felt he had missed out on in his own Catholic education, providing a nurturing environment and a chance for young children to express and enjoy themselves, within a carefully structured system.<sup>77</sup>

As a teacher of biology at Box Hill, Robert Martin recalls feeling frustrated with the constricting focus on high achieving students to the detriment of the large majority who would not be pursuing a university pathway.<sup>78</sup> In anticipation of the commencement of the MRSS in the early 1970s, Robert undertook a trip to visit Steiner schools in Germany. The trip was influential in confirming his sense of the possibility of what he saw as a ‘loving, intelligently structured, nurturing schooling’ for children, that produced well-rounded individuals. He found the hosts at the schools he visited candid about the challenges and shortcomings, mainly related to staff. Nevertheless, they were supportive and urged him above all to strive ‘to forget all rush’ with the children, and as

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<sup>77</sup> Adrian May, interview with Tao Bak May 9, 2016. May subsequently taught at several Steiner schools in Australia, including Little Yarra Steiner School, in Yarra Junction, an hour east of Melbourne, and more recently Yallingup Steiner School in Western Australia, where he continues to teach at time of writing.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Martin, interview. See also Richard Teese, *For the Common Weal: The Public High School in Victoria, 1910 – 2010* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2014).

the school proceeded, this is what he tried to do. While Paul and Pam had spent three years time studying and teaching in Steiner education settings in Germany from 1964-1966, and a year teaching at Glenaeon Steiner school in Sydney (1967), Alex had taken over the leadership of the Michael Group. Not long after Paul and Pam's return, following a year teaching at Glenaeon in Sydney, a confrontation between Paul and Alex saw Paul withdraw his involvement until more than decade later,<sup>79</sup> although Paul's children would still attend the school during those early years. The education group nevertheless continued to meet regularly, and might have done so indefinitely were it not for a visit by inspiring educator and author Francis Edmonds, who challenged the group to set a starting date to set their ideas into action.<sup>80</sup>

As Tim Coffey recalls it, the establishment of the school itself was made possible by the funding for independent schools introduced by the Whitlam government, and the generous contributions of a wealthy supporter, in the form of Garry Richardson. Son of Merv Richardson, the inventor of the Victa lawn mower, Richardson was an enthusiastic advocate of Steiner education, financially supporting educational initiatives in both Victoria and New South Wales.<sup>81</sup> Having sold the company in 1970, he invested in various ventures, one of which was a high rise to be built in Melbourne's inner city, for which he commissioned an architecture project to design the façade, for \$22,000. The building was never built, but the prize went to Podolinsky, who allocated a portion

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<sup>79</sup> Paul Martin, Interview. At time writing, Paul continues to teach high school mathematics at the MRSS, having returned after the departure of Podolinsky in the early 1980s.

<sup>80</sup> On Francis Edmonds see Michael Spence, *The Story of Emerson College: Its Founding Impulse, Work and Form* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge Press, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> On the Victa Mower story see Richard V. Wood, 'Richardson, Mervyn Victor (1893–1972)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/richardson-mervyn-victor-11517/text20505>, published first in hardcopy 2002, accessed online 1 September 2017. For Garry Richardson's involvement in Steiner education in New South Wales see Alan Whitehead, *Memoirs of a Rudolf Steiner Teacher* (Blackheath, N.S.W.: Golden Beetle Books, 2001).

to some land and a beach house for his children, and the remaining \$16,000 to financing the building of the kindergarten, with an inspired design also of his making.<sup>82</sup> A suitable portion of land had been identified and purchased in the hilly, largely bush suburb of Warranwood, in the outer east of Melbourne. While building commenced, the kindergarten proceeded in its temporary premises at the property of Joan Grey in Donvale (coincidentally next door to the progressive ERA school) in 1972. An additional interest free loan of \$64,000 from Richardson enabled the building of a class 1-3 complex,<sup>83</sup> and by 1974 the school had moved into its purpose built buildings in Warranwood, described by reporter Helen Rosengren writing for *The Herald* in 1974, as being a school which was ‘as natural in its teaching methods as it is in its setting.’<sup>84</sup> The kindergarten building, she reported, featured sloped walls, and a broad circular space, intentionally designed for children of that age, making it feel ‘warm and comfortable’, and practical for the teacher. The following year Suzanne Hewitt writing for the *The Age* wrote of the school that it:

... nestles in a sleepy hollow, its purpose built classrooms sculpted out of the rugged landscape, and an air of peace and harmony pervades it all... the school is part of the land and the land is part of the school. Inside, the rooms open up with wide-angled windows. The warm wooden floors and soft-glowing walls, irregular in shape, impose no box-like limits. They create endless possibilities. You get the feeling that anything could happen here and you wouldn’t be surprised.’<sup>85</sup>

Connected by a loose network, Steiner schools draw on common insights, approaches and curriculum traditions, but are not formally affiliated or commonly administered.

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<sup>82</sup> Podolinsky, *Life*, 101.

<sup>83</sup> Podolinsky, *Life*, 102.

<sup>84</sup> Helen Rosengren, ‘Their Circle of Friends’ *The Herald*, November 8, 1974.

<sup>85</sup> Suzanne Hewitt, ‘Teaching the Whole Being in the Rudolf Steiner Way’, *The Age*, July 8, 1975, 16. Includes a description of observed lessons.

Each school or initiative necessarily reflects its own circumstances and seeks to give Steiner ideas its own expression, much as the children become are encouraged to become uniquely themselves.<sup>86</sup> For the MRSS much of the inspiration for this expression came from Alex Podolinsky. In addition to designing the buildings and managing the annual budget, Alex, along with Ruth Wittig ran weekly teacher development lectures, attended also by parents who wanted to ‘drink from the well’.<sup>87</sup> As one participant recalls, these were always inspiring, and always featured a practical emphasis.

Alex Podolinsky had been steeped in Anthroposophical ideas since early childhood.<sup>88</sup> Apart from a mother who engaged with Anthroposophy actively, he had spent a year at Dornach in Switzerland, at the site of the Goetheanum (headquarters of the Anthroposophical community), having the general run of the place, and receiving personal tuition by many of those who had worked with Rudolf Steiner directly. In a very real sense, he embodied Anthroposophical knowledge, never ceasing in its development and pursuit. Following the war, Alex had spent several years teaching and learning about Steiner education at the Frieberg Steiner School, which he had helped re-open following the war, before emigrating to Australia in 1949. As mentioned earlier, having spent several decades extending biodynamic farming in Australia, Alex turned his attention in the late 1960s to the founding of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School, as well as the Wandin Springs curative home. Along with Ruth Wittig, he later also founded the Ghilgai School, a primary Steiner school in Kilsyth, likewise in

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<sup>86</sup> People often want a standardised description of the school, reflects founding teacher Pauline Ward, ‘but they can’t have it’. Ward, *Interview*.

<sup>87</sup> Pauline Ward, interview.

<sup>88</sup> Podolinsky, *Life*, 6.

Melbourne's east. Described by Paul Martin as something of 'controversial figure' in all of the proceedings, Alex

...was, or he is, a very talented person. He was inspiring. And he was the driving force behind it [the school]. Year after year he would budget expenses, and his projections were very accurate. He drafted a constitution, which was then taken to lawyers, and so on, and overall, although there are faults in it, it has served us very well, and shows a lot of foresight.<sup>89</sup>

In leading the teacher development sessions, there was always an emphasis on the practical application of the ideas being studied. As Podolinsky puts it,

we never read lectures when I was in charge of the Melbourne group. It was always something new that was coming. And so it should be. And so it is in real Steiner education. It should encourage that people become active!<sup>90</sup>

It was a philosophy that above all had a practical element to it, requiring not only to be understood, but done. As Ward recounts in comparing her time as a primary teacher in the state system with her later years as a Steiner educator, in the state system...

every day I wonder[ed] what I'm going to teach, and I don't know what the children know, and it was that sort of feeling. Because it was a tension: I liked children. But it was a matter of anxiety. You knew what you had to teach but there was some unease underneath... I really didn't know what the children knew, even though you tested a lot. There was an area of blankness that was making me very unsure about my job. Whereas when I started teaching for Steiner schools, it was difficult, but when you got into it, I never was worrying what I had to teach, or what I could teach, you could go further and further with so many things. It could be music or rhythm or storytelling or physical. You could do everything you

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<sup>89</sup> Paul adds that, in his view 'the flip side of it was that he did like to control people, and perhaps he didn't know himself very well. Bit of a flawed genius.'

<sup>90</sup> Podolinsky, interview.

wanted to do. Which was such a change from ‘well what do I do today?’ because, you had this meaning underneath, that extended me. Which was just fascinating then, to be trying to do it.<sup>91</sup>

While the approach was demanding, it was rewarding, as May recalls,

I found it a most exciting place for a child to grow up in because it was so... like those billy carts... every child would go home every night absolutely covered in mud, or dirty [laughter].. if they didn’t you knew they didn’t have a good time.<sup>92</sup>

While it appeared to be animated by a spirit of adventure, Elsa Martin recalls her first impressions of the school as a mixture of rigour and responsiveness:

I loved the way the kids, the classes were taken out for a walk, if it was a really beautiful day, in the morning, [and] for quite a long time. So there was the freedom to be receptive, which an ordinary school doesn’t have because the timetable is so fixed. There was a freedom, particularly then. There weren’t bells, but at the same time there was really rigorous work, a huge amount of discipline and work on the part of the teachers.<sup>93</sup>

It could take years for the underlying philosophy to become apparent to those who engaged with the school, and sometimes even longer to begin to integrate it. As Ward recounts, it was only after several years away from the group while raising her children, that she began to be able to read Steiner’s works and make sense of them. In the meantime, Margaret Skerry attended the teacher development sessions regularly, which involved, as she recalls,

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<sup>91</sup> Pauline Ward, interview.

<sup>92</sup> Adrian May, founding teacher, Interview, May 9, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Elsa Martin, interview. The description has affinity with more recent bush and forest kindergarten movements. See also Peter Kraftl, *Geographies of Alternative Education: Diverse Learning Spaces for Children and Young People*, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2013).

...various other people [than Podolinsky] taking particular segments of it, like story-telling Ruth did, and... also painting. And we made books that could be used in the kindergarten, that were our own created stories with paintings to go with them. And we made puppets and created puppet plays, and lots of other subjects in the Steiner curriculum, form drawing I think Pauline [Ward] might have done.<sup>94</sup>

Elsa however was initially unable to attend the Friday sessions as her then husband, Tony Staley, was appointed minister for the Australian Capital Territory, February 1976 to December 1977, during which time she took the opportunity to complete an education qualification and ‘to tell everyone about the wonderful school she had discovered.’ By the time she returned, however, she was ready to join the community that had made such an impression on her, and she didn’t look back.<sup>95</sup>

While Alex Podolinsky’s at times confrontational personality led to his ultimate removal from the MRSS, his practical acumen and indisputable ability to manage, lead and inspire a diverse group of people in the engagement and application of Steiner’s philosophical ideas and ideals, ensured the establishment of the first Steiner school in Victoria on a solid footing. Indeed, as Podolinsky suggests somewhat defiantly, ‘it has the foundations of a Gothic castle!’. Notably, Podolinsky’s international travels and talks inspired numerous parents and educators from places such as New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia, to immigrate to Melbourne to become part of the community that was growing up around this vibrant educational initiative, and to share in its collective embodiment.

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<sup>94</sup> Margaret Skerry, interview.

<sup>95</sup> Elsa spent several decades as a teacher at MRSS She also eventually married Paul Martin.

For the group involved in the founding of the MRSS the focus was both on extending their own understandings, and on finding a general expression for the school, with perhaps the biggest challenge represented by establishing the leadership body of the school. As founding MRSS educator, and subsequent administrator of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner Seminar<sup>96</sup> – the teacher development program that grew out of the initial teacher development sessions – Helen Cock suggests, despite the lack of experience, the group always had a sense that ‘we would find our own way’, and when European or other visitors would come and make comments or observations, a strong sense of ‘Australian independence shone through’.<sup>97</sup> As Tim Coffey suggests further, in the early years there was an energy, and a spirit of adventure: ‘we were going somewhere, you know!’.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, the operation of the group in some isolation from other progressive initiatives in Victoria, suggests the metaphor perhaps of a musical ensemble, turned somewhat inward, and employing an intense mutual ‘listening’ to facilitate the coming together of their own interpretation of Steiner’s educational ideas. For the group who founded the school, and their sense of the philosophy they were working with, a reference to karmic destiny is perhaps not surprising,<sup>99</sup> along with Helen’s insistence that the roots of the school go deep, and that ‘they are planted in Anthroposophical soil’. It is perhaps not surprising that that almost fifty years later most of the teachers are still actively involved in the school, and that the school has grown to

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<sup>96</sup> See <http://steinerseminar.net.au/>.

<sup>97</sup> Helen Cock, founding teacher, interview with Tao Bak, June 4, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Tim Coffey, interview.

<sup>99</sup> The current account is an exploratory attempt to examine the early history of the MRSS. The experience of students, parents, local community members, amongst others, have not been examined here. Several founding MRSS educators were either not available or not included due to practical limitations of the project. These include Marcus Cox, Wendy Duff, Ruth Wittig, Judith Hughes, Sandra Busch, and Charles Bagot, amongst others.

be the largest of its kind in Australia, and with the most influence, evidenced in Victoria currently hosting the highest number of Steiner schools of any Australian state.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the founding of the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School in Victoria in the 1970s, with an emphasis on the experience of engagement with an educational philosophy that received a boost, but was not defined by the ‘opening up’ of social, political and educational spheres that the Whitlam government ushered in. While Steiner education could trace its roots to 1920s Germany, it was nevertheless enabled by the practicalities of the time – not least the funding opportunities they presented themselves, and the sense that things could be done differently. In examining the complexities of the philosophical opening up that was represented by 1970s, it is clear that the MRSS was both part of and separate to other progressive initiatives. While a prime concern for other initiatives was the question of innovation, and of letting the community in, as Paul Martin points out, the big challenge for the educators involved with the MRSS was

to get across the idea that we were not interested in the idea of precocious early development, but in laying a sound foundation for later life. And also, getting across the idea of metamorphosis of faculties. That for example, that the artistic work in the early years translates later on with an ability to cope with career change and ability to envisage doing something completely different and to feel confident about it, and so on. So, we had to get across the idea that we were educating for life, rather than for university entrance. That was quite a challenge.

Steiner’s Anthroposophical ideas came in a complicated and deceptively accessible package. Whilst the outcomes appear to present a nourishing and rich approach to

education, the means to attain these outcomes demand rigorous application and study of thoughts and ideas not always readily available within the wider discourse community. Ultimately the four Steiner schools that were established in Australia in the 1970s represent in some ways ‘alternatives’ that both preceded and outlived the circumstances and milieu of their founding.

As one Steiner educator put it in regards to the period, there was an atmosphere of progress, but also the knowledge that interest in Steiner’s ideas had been there all along, at least since the 1920s, and this simply continued as it were ‘alongside’.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, for educators such as Elsa Martin and Margaret Skerry, engagement with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner resonated, and proved life-changing, in terms of the how the world, and its possibilities, were subsequently viewed. In taking a biographical sociological approach to examining the experiences of the founding educators of the MRSS, this paper has emphasised the felt experience of those involved in founding Steiner education in Victoria, through the founding of the MRSS. In foregrounding this experience, this paper has drawn on the notion of educational philosopher of L.A. Reid, that education can be conceived as a cultural form, and be treated as an aesthetic object. The experience of this educational knowledge can be further characterised as an ‘embodied knowing’, explored and lived out in practice. It is hoped that this examination has contributed to the understanding of the complexities of education in 1970s Victoria, as well as to the tracing of the history of Steiner education internationally. By positioning the collective experience of educational practices and traditions as a cultural ‘whole’, in a way that allows to some extent for conveying ‘the-thing-in-itself,’ these stories may assist in finding ways to better understand the

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<sup>100</sup> Norman Sievers, interview with Tao Bak, July 6, 2015.

complexities, and intentions, of 'alternatives' in a wide array of settings.