

Submission regarding Castlemaine Secondary College (CSC) specialised (Steiner) curriculum

Preamble

Part of the process of introducing schemes such as the Steiner alternative stream should necessarily be communication to the whole of the community the intended curriculum content and practices. It is appalling that this program was introduced and run within a climate of secrecy. Many of our questions have gone unanswered. Information evenings are run without informing the whole community. Steiner students do not attend school activities that others attend compulsorily. Issues such as running the Year 9 classes on the senior campus with extra resources and without the requirement of a uniform have led to many inequalities. In fact this group runs on the senior campus specifically because the 'Steiner parents' did not *want* a school uniform. We also oppose school uniform and can argue strongly with evidence against it – but have accepted the policy for the sake of harmony. We are also aware of the educational evidence against homework but we are unable to make inroads against the excessive homework that my children have had on the Junior campus. It does appear that the Steiner mini-school group is treated very differently. The extra resources and energy privileging this very tiny program are detracting from the overall wellbeing of the school and indeed the community.

This program should not in reality be called a stream, and in fact it does not accord with the definition of a stream provided in the Y7 transition handbook. The other 'streams' on junior campus are merely classes grouped around a one or two, class content difference. The Steiner group can only be described as a mini-school or an enclave, it is very different to all other streams in the school.

Some of the general teaching practices within Steiner education may be successful and useful alternatives for educators to consider. Others have little general support and have not been tested by any form of real *evidence* based trialing. As such, they should be considered sceptically by the community until otherwise demonstrated. There appears to be no published testing coming from this experiment at Castlemaine or in fact from anywhere else. If it was only to the detriment of the children of the parents who chose it that would be bad enough but the whole school community is suffering from this very unscientific experiment.

“Appropriateness: the provision of a specialised approach is focused on and is capable of delivering quality educational outcomes for all students.”

It has been very difficult for the 'outside general community' to make judgements about the appropriateness of the curriculum offered to the Steiner stream. General documentation of programmed approaches has not been made available on request. In line with other Steiner education programs, it is the 'collegiate' which appears to make the decisions about what is incorporated. Thus 'appropriateness' seems to be a matter of judgement of this team and not whole-school concepts of sound pedagogy.

In terms of having a select specialised curriculum offered to one group of students but not others at the same level of the school, it appears that there has been no consideration of 'quality educational outcomes for all students' in the school.. Additionally, given the highly personal nature of the mentoring available to the Steiner stream, mainstream Year 9 & 10 students can rightfully feel aggrieved at

being treated like second class citizens. Success in AIMS tests tells us little with such a small and intensively coached cohort.

All students in the Steiner cluster may or may not have appropriate outcomes in relation to the P-10 guidelines – that is very difficult to assess due to lack of access to curriculum documents. It is never the less clear that this program does not benefit all students in the whole of the College.

Responsiveness: the approach is responsive to the existing school culture and school community needs.

Castlemaine is a rural community with just one secondary school. The prevailing culture is relatively conservative. However all families in the area have a right to have the very best state school that resources allow. The school should be a place that provides the highest possible standard of education and responds to the needs of all. Responsiveness does not imply that a state school must provide a specialty education for every religious, spiritual, lifestyle group. There are private schools for those who do not want a secular education for their children. It is not the role of the state system to provide for these perceived needs. Alternatives are provided for the educational needs of pupils with interests in different subject areas and with differing intellectual abilities. A great deal of effort needs to go into providing for these without diversions created by minor interest groups.

The Steiner stream caters to the interests of a small minority of parents and their view of how their children should be educated. It is not predicated by any real educational necessity. Student numbers are difficult to ascertain accurately but external counts suggest perhaps ten students are now at Castlemaine who would otherwise have gone elsewhere if the program had not been introduced. At the same time there are many cases of students moving to alternative settings and more wishing to because the school is not providing well enough for their mainstream needs. In early negotiations a target of one group of twenty *new* students was used as the baseline for the introduction of the stream and that has never been achieved as far as outsiders to the program can see.

Alignment: the approach is aligned with Department of Education & Training policy requirements and Victorian Government legislative requirements are met.

The CSC is currently struggling to provide the basic requirements of VELs. For example our daughter in Year 8 is currently doing only one class of physical education and no sport – unless she organises it out of class time. This is well below the VELs requirement.

An area of the curriculum that does not appear to be well handled in documentation provided by other Steiner and Waldorf Schools is Science. In Steiner education, science appears to be very largely based in gardening/ horticulture/environmental education – which at best gives a very limited view of Science and at worst is devoid of science methodology and philosophy altogether. (See attachment 5. for Collingwood.) Note specifically the Comparative physiology Main lesson topic outline) The students coming into the program from outside CSC will have had little or no real science education in their earlier years. Does this then continue in year 9 and 10? As an interested outsider I have not been informed. General basic knowledge, theories and principles of physics and chemistry appear to be neglected. Scientific literacy appears to be lacking in this approach.

Feasibility: the approach is supported by the school community, sound governance, and allocation of resources (budget and staffing arrangements).

The initial proposal to include a 'Steiner stream' at CSC was offered to the school community as a way of circumventing the dropping enrolments. Initial plans were that at least 20 students were required to run any program of this nature. That would seem a low number but even that low number was not adhered to, The year 10 group I believe has now around ten students, not a feasible number for other programs to continue.

Given that the total numbers of students at CSC number approx one thousand, School resources are being severely stretched in order to provide a specialty program for a very select few in Years 9 and 10. The level of resource allocation and the inordinate amount of energy going into this minority group, which is getting very special treatment, is very divisive in the community. Specialist subject teachers such as Language, Music and Science need to fit in around the needs of this one group and forced to travel between campuses. Timetabling is constantly an issue in secondary schools and in this school this whole issue adds an unwarranted extra factor into the mix.

It was not a belief in the educational worth of Steiner but attracting additional Students that was the motivation for setting up this enclave. With that in mind a relatively large commitment of teacher and planning time was devoted to the introduction. A huge amount of energy appears to have gone into this project while other basic approaches such as supporting the Music program for which Castlemaine is well known appear to be faltering. Science and mathematics and indeed general HPE and English/ Drama specialist projects that were in place in the past, appear to be much less well supported than previously.

Equity: the provision of a specialised curriculum approach does not disadvantage any student at the school, and the notion of choice is maintained.

The greatest issue with the introduction of this stream has been equity. The idea of every student having equity, and not being disadvantaged in achieving their goals, has been totally sacrificed for the introduction of this stream. Currently all Year 7 –9 students at Castlemaine have a compulsory uniform code. To avoid having to abide by this, the Steiner group is located on the Senior campus. No other Year 9 students are able, on a daily basis, to avoid the imposed uniform policy nor access the superior facilities that currently exist on the Senior campus. This inequality is compounded by much better staff student ratios for Steiner classes.

The continuity provided by the 'block lesson' and the close association with a few select teachers, are practises that align with major ideas in VELs. However it is only the Steiner stream students who benefit from this approach. If this is an educationally sound practice that provides better outcomes then surely all the Junior campus students should benefit from a College-wide implementation of this practice.

Quality: appropriate quality assurance mechanisms exist for all curriculum approaches with regard to teaching standards and educational outcomes for students.

Teaching standards within the Steiner stream are not something that we can really comment on as there has been little data offered to the school community. However given the excellent staff student ratio that the class enjoys it would be reasonable to

assume that the teaching standard should be well above the average at CSC. As stated elsewhere, all students would certainly benefit from such ratio's. The educational outcomes for the students in the program in some areas may be excellent given the concentrated effort and personalised treatment they enjoy. However there are Key Learning Areas that appear not well served by the educational 'Philosophy' of Steiner education, including science. To make the transition to Year 11 and 12 in these areas Steiner educated children would probably need some catch up tutoring in Year 7 and 8 science. Possibly a better name for this program than Steiner Transition would be Steiner Remedial program.

The educational quality of the introduced specialty 'Steiner program' has not been measured against all the outcomes of VELS/CSF 2. The initial program to be trialed has not been documented in a way that is transparent, processes used hidden from view and the resources used to achieve outcomes have not been accurately documented or presented.

The issue of quality must be considered for all students. Resource allocation has a huge effect on quality. The hidden costs of having these students located in one place and both Junior and Senior campus teachers having to attend to their small numbers cannot be easily assessed. The effect of this one group's needs being addressed to the detriment of other Year 9/10 students in Music and French for instance are not spelled out or made public.

Accountability: the school maintains accountability to its school community by operating, communicating and reporting in an open and transparent manner.

There are two ways in which accountability has been neglected in the implementation of the specialty Steiner stream. Firstly the Steiner stream itself appears to be a school unto itself. Accountability of and in the program, teaching and learning are issues that are certainly not apparent or transparent. When any new program is introduced it should be done with accountability processes in mind. Personal experience regarding this issue, has been that when questions are asked, a tacit local moral order takes over. Anyone who questions and asks for details is necessarily treated as an enemy of diversity and unwilling to change. Asking for rational argument supported by documentation and educational research, meets with at best deaf ears and often, open hostility.

Secondly the real impact on others in the school and community has not been acknowledged. In a time of pressure on resources the addition of speciality programs that satisfy the perceived needs of a group of parents but without sound educational basis, adds to the fragmentation of an already over stretched, under resourced state school. Again personal communications from parents and teachers who are unwilling to be named agree that there are powerful pressures within the school to support the program. The climate is one more of fear than of open acknowledgment of genuine educational issues. It may be unrelated, but it is apparent that almost all teachers holding higher duties, who openly opposed the introduction of the Steiner stream, have since lost their higher duties. Further the employment of a teacher who is unarguably a religious practitioner of the Steiner belief system is to say the least, naive. It is inevitable that the community will ask questions that evoke the possibility of conspiracies and hidden agendas.

In order for true accountability to be ongoing in the current climate it is imperative that the current audit process result in published data. The nature of the assessment processes used, the data collected and the conclusions drawn should be open to interrogation.

Attachments:

1. Evidence of misuse of school email by a Departmental employee derived by a web search.
2. A second result of the above search.
3. An excerpt of a book written by the founder of the ICA of which the above teacher is a priest of the Order of Melchizedek.
5. Steiner course information from the Collingwood College website.

3 and 5 above demonstrate a) the religiosity of the Steiner movement and b) the nonsensicality of some of their educational beliefs.

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