

Tuesday, 9th June 2015

Aurora Newsletter #5

For Your Calendar:

Term 2 Wednesday April 22nd - Friday June 19th

Term 3 Wednesday July 15th - Friday September 18th

Mansfield Reserve Excursion Friday June 5th

Midwinter Festival Friday 19th June, time TBA

Dear Aurora Parents and Friends,

Messages from James

Punctuality

As the mornings become colder and darker, it is harder to get to school on time. However, it is important to remain punctual for several reasons. 1. It sends a message to children that their education is valued. 2. It sends a message to teachers that you value their contribution. 3. It allows teachers and the whole class to start the most important learning part of the day uninterrupted with the whole group. 3. It means the children feel part of the whole group if they are able to interact with other children before class time and start learning activities at the same time.

Please contact the school if your child is running late and for those struggling with transport arrangements or other reasons for lateness please discuss with me.

Midwinter Festival

A note will go out to parents next week giving details of our midwinter festival on the last evening of term. The children are learning songs and verses to capture the mood of the season and prepare for this event. It would be helpful for parents and friends to also prepare by learning these songs and verses. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons there will be a gathering on the grass near the front gate at 2.45pm for children, parents and friends to share winter songs and verses.

Two Articles for your interest

A few years ago Annabel Brown, our Kindergarten Teacher, wrote an article on environmental education in early childhood published in Playgroup Australia. I think it is very relevant today. It is world environment week this week and Annabel captures in this article the approach to environmental education appropriate for young children. Our role is to instil in children a love of nature and a positive, constructive view of what they can do to care for our planet starting with their immediate surroundings. It is important at this age for children to be filled with wonder at the natural world and work with purpose at building a sustainable future. It is unhelpful for children to be

burdened with world environmental problems that they do not fully understand and have very little power to act upon. Instead, our task with early childhood and primary children is to touch their hearts with as many opportunities as possible to build on their connection with the natural world and act locally.

Also attached is an article I wrote on boys' education. Please grab a nice cuppa when the kids are asleep and have a good read.

The Little Shop

Our little shop has been very quiet lately, so just a reminder that we are still here!! I have recently compiled a price list which is almost ready to distribute so you know what we have. More stock is on the way so that list will soon be getting a little longer.

Of particular mention is that we will soon be stocking handmade felt toys from Himalayan Journey. This company employs 100 women in Nepal. While the workshop in Nepal is still standing after the earthquakes the women are, understandably, too afraid to return. Himalayan Journey are seeking to re-establish work for these women, many of whom are the sole financial support for their families, especially now that the destruction has forced many people out of work. They are currently working from their homes but hope to re-establish the supportive community they have as a group. The sales of these products will assist in creating stability and security for all these families.

Also attached is information regarding an appeal for financial support to assist aid workers in Nepal.

Melissa

Ebba Bodame Workshop

On the 18th and 19th July we are hosting a workshop for playgroup facilitators here at Aurora. We still have three places for anyone who may be interested in attending. Cost is \$150 for the two days and would be suitable for anyone thinking they may enjoy doing this kind of work in the future or want to gain a deeper understanding of Steiner Playgroups. It is likely that some of the information would be relevant to home life also.

Please contact Annabel if you are interested in attending or for more information.

Below is a summary of a boys' education talk James gave at Blue Mountains Steiner School at their Open Day on Saturday 23 May 2015

Firm, Fair, Fun, Focused.

How can we provide for what boys want in their education?

A few years back I attended a seminar on boys' education run by Steve Biddulph. At the time he had just completed research based on asking boys about their schooling and what makes the best teachers. He summarised the findings into these four categories: firm, fair, fun, focused.

What is interesting about this summary is that some may think boys are just interested in mucking around. On the contrary, they wish to be engaged in purposeful tasks and yearn for a sense of achievement.

Although, in broad societal terms, men have had a good run, in recent history the education system in Australia has not worked well for boys. In general they are about 1 year behind girls academically at the start of primary school,

They tend to have higher testosterone levels and higher activity levels, much higher autism rates. We now see that girls achieve at a higher level across all subject areas in the HSC and boys make up the vast majority of expulsions and suspensions. They are 3-4 times more likely than girls to commit suicide, 4 times more likely to suffer from serious mental health issues such as depression in their adolescent years, 5 times more likely to go to prison. In the past there were avenues for boys to pursue outside the narrow parameters of academic work such as apprenticeships and manual work. These opportunities have all but dried up so they are left to stay in a system that, on the whole, doesn't cater well for them.

The purpose of this article is not to spend a lot of time on pointing out the differences between boys' and girls' behaviour, brain function and learning. This is an ever-changing area and, as interesting as it is to me, I will instead focus on what, from my research and practice, I see as successful strategies for boys. Interestingly, these strategies seem to work well for girls as well. My argument is that the structure of education in the past 100 years in Australia, ie chalk and talk and sitting down for 5 hours per day, has been better suited to girls mainly because they seem to have been able to cope. I would argue that changing the method of delivery and increased capacity for engagement is better for boys and girls. I will also look at what a Steiner school can provide for boys.

My Background

In the past I have worked in a girls' school as a primary teacher, a boys' school as an outdoor educator for high school students and in several coeducational settings in small, large, state and independent schools. In recent times my work has been mainly in educational leadership and management in Steiner schools. My main role currently is as Principal at Aurora Southern Highlands Steiner School for three days per week. I also teach at Blue Mountains Steiner School one day per week and I am a Professional Experience Advisor for Master of Teaching students with the University of Western Sydney one day per week.

Throughout this breadth of experience as an educator I have tried to view learning through the boys' lens. I have tried to always be conscious of my own school experience and attempted to improve it for the boys with which I interact today.

Inspirational Teachers

The teachers that I remember as being effective were all men and they all had a sense of fun. They were interested in me as a person and encouraged me to develop my talents. They believed in my ability and expected great things of me. One teacher, Glen McCaffery, gave up his lunchtimes to enable a group of us to pursue our sporting interests. Another, Michael Hines, had a sense of fun and enthusiasm for his subject, Maths, and had a personal connection with all his students. Another teacher I admired, Geoff Hewitt, taught me in Year 7. He pulled me aside one day when I was being silly in class and reminded me of my role as leader in the class and the influence I had on the rest of the class. This had a profound effect on me and I have carried his words of advice with me ever since. He took me seriously and was prepared to steer me firmly in the right direction. I can think of other examples of teachers that have left a lasting positive impression. They all had high expectations of me and expected me to be focused on purposeful tasks. They had a sense of fun, firmness, and made great efforts to be fair and to be seen to be fair. They didn't give me special treatment; they treated all students with the same sense of care.

My Teaching Experiences – Failures and Successes

I would like to share some experiences with you of my teaching of boys. Although I have experience from early childhood all the way through to tertiary education, most of my experience and training is in primary education. I have had some moments of failure and many successes when educating boys of this age. In a Steiner school, it is important for us to be balanced in our approach to teaching to head, hands and heart. In the primary years it is most important to work with the heart. This involves working artistically and considering beauty in all work. In my work, music, in particular singing, is especially important.

Alec (not his real name) was a Year 6 boy in my class who was very sporty and found it hard to keep focus on academic tasks. At the end of the year, the whole of Year 6 (2 classes) used to sing a goodbye song to the whole school. Alec had not learned the song and in our final rehearsal he was being disruptive so I asked him to sing the song in front of the whole group. I have very rarely used public humiliation as a tool and I felt that I may have pushed it too far. He eventually sang the song with my help. I spent the night tossing and turning wondering if I had done the right thing. On the final day of the year the students engaged in a choice of craft activities with specialists. He very carefully made a beautiful necklace and then offered it to me as a gift, a peace offering it seemed. It was clear that he saw a need for healing our relationship and I saw it too. Boys are often fragile creatures and value relationships more than they display.

Jay (not his real name) was an autistic boy who came to me in Year 1 after spending much of his Kindergarten hiding in a tent in the classroom. To meet Jay's needs I made two decisions. 1. I would put in an effort. That is, see Jay as a worthwhile human being and an opportunity for me to improve my teaching practice. Not to see him, or his behaviour, as a nuisance. 2. The changes I would make to suit Jay would be for the whole class and would be for their benefit.

Making this commitment to Jay proved very successful. His tent sat on top of the cupboard and was never used. He was given clear boundaries and behavioural expectations, along with the whole class. There were many opportunities for physical and hands-on activities. There were opportunities to go outside the traditional 'Steiner approach' for this age so that Jay was given an opportunity to pursue his passions such as world geography. This opportunity was extended to the whole class so we shared in other individual passions such as ukulele playing and quail farming. I also ensured that I was well organised and gave Jay and the rest of the class clear organisational and teaching instructions. This was facilitated by visual cues.

Jay is now a successful, confident student. I am proud of my efforts with Jay and I believe meeting his needs helped the whole class.

Boys' Education Conference

The Boys' Education Conference at the King's School in 2010 had a huge impact on my understanding of boys' education. Dr Smith from the UK spoke about the research he was conducting on 12 and 13 year old boys throughout the world (at the start of high school). He asked them a series of questions. One of them was: 'would you prefer to do a creative writing piece or push a rock up a hill and working harder physically than you have ever worked before?'. The answer, in almost every case (no matter how 'academic' the boys were) showed a preference for the physical task.

He also spoke to these boys about Facebook and other social media. The vast majority expressed that they did not like Facebook and wished it did not exist so they could have face-to-face interactions. However, they felt that they had to use it as their main communication tool.

In Dr Smith's study, many boys expressed a desire to be part of the 'creative class' and work in design jobs but they felt they weren't given the tools at school.

Another speaker at the Boys' Education Conference that made a significant impact on me was a psychologist, Dr Michael Gurian (Gurian Institute US). He made a plea to wait until age 12 for computer use in schools and instead do more hands on activities. Those that do not use computers in primary schools catch up with (or overtake) peers within 3 months of high school.

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg also spoke at the same conference and made a plea to teachers as the last bastion of hope for boys. He stated that parents are no longer up to the task- they don't seem to be able to set limits or say no.

Brain Research and the SEA Governance Leadership and Management Conference May 2015

We now know that making generalisations about brain function in regard to gender difference is flawed and that every brain is different. Dr Norman Doidge who wrote 'How the Brain Changes Itself' sees from his research that every brain is different and has great capacity for change. It does not need to be defined by gender or even genetics to the same extent that we previously thought.

Regardless of gender, the brain's capacity to think clearly and creatively is very much influenced by social-emotional factors. It seems, the key to academic success and physical well-being is social-emotional health.

We have been informed as educators that positive reinforcement is very important and that we should be giving students 5 times as many positive comments as negative or critical comments. There is now physical proof. At the 2015 Steiner Education Australia Governance Leadership and Management conference, Dr Jeff Bailey from UNE spoke about the effect of negative input on the amygdala. (The amygdala is responsible for processing emotional response). Neurons respond 80,000 times faster in the amygdala than in the frontal lobe. When a subject experiences negative or critical input the amygdala stays active for 3 times longer than a positive one. The brain thus remembers these incidents more vividly. Also, the effect is to shut down the brain's capacity to think clearly or creatively. The issue for boys is that there has been an expectation for boys to respond with greater aloofness to negative input; to 'tough it out' while there tends to have been more nurturing behaviour displayed towards girls.

There has also been a lot of work done recently on mirror neurons and the capacity for our physiological state to match those around us. When we are in the same room together our heart rates, blood pressure and mood attempt to match. When we touch, there is an even stronger correlation. This has enormous implications for educators.

So...what should we then do for boys?

In summary we should.....

- Create a caring, safe and challenging learning environment that allows boys to take risks.
- Maintain a healthy balance of physical, practical, academic, artistic and social learning
- Give boys opportunities to help others and work together
- Have high expectations
- Seek opportunities for success and celebrate them
- Set clear goals and use encouragement to reach them
- Use explicit instruction and check for understanding
- Use visual cues
- Be a healthy, balanced role model
- Show interest
- Be firm, fair, fun and focused

The above pointers are useful for teaching and parenting not just boys but girls too and help establish the loving and purposeful learning environment we want at Aurora.

James



- Earthquake Nepal -

The waldorf-emergency pedagogical aid organization stART international e.V.
emergency aid for children (www.start-international.org) urgently needs

**your financial support for trauma-therapeutic and emergency
educational assistance for disaster affected children in Nepal**

**Donation account: stART international e.V. BIC/SWIFT:
PBNKDEFF IBAN: DE56 7001 0080 0009 0098 05**

On April 25th Nepal, one of the world's poorest countries, was hit by its most severe natural disaster in 80 years. The earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 and its aftershocks changed Kathmandu and its surroundings into a place of complete ruin, chaos and desperation. Many buildings collapsed, people were hit and buried under the ruins.

There is a shortage of all basic goods: electricity, food, medicine, shelter.

In an emergency situation like this there is limited time and little security for those children who survived.

Based on this background stART international feels the strong commitment to take action and provide trauma therapeutic and emergency educational assistance to affected children in Nepal. The assistance is based on the knowledge for the necessities of children in this kind of situations deriving from over 65 missions with a similar task.

From May 8th onwards we will be in Nepal preparing a 3 to 6 months' emergency project to commence immediately after the completion of the first lifesaving help.

**To make all of this possible, the stART team urgently needs your
financial support. Please help us, to help the children of Nepal!**

Should we –unexpectedly- not raise sufficient funds to realize the planned project, all donations received for Nepal will be given to partner organisations for the direct work with effected children there.

**We true heartedly thank all those who support stART
international's work!**

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For matters concerning individual students please contact your child's class teacher.

For administration matters including fees, please contact Mel on admin@aurorasteiner.nsw.edu.au or 4862 2300.

For whole school matter please contact me (James) on principal@aurorasteiner.nsw.edu.au or 0432212586