

# Reading Research Supports Waldorf Approach

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To pupils of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and teachers in Rudolf Steiner schools, the assertion that early reading instruction will not improve reading long-term is not very surprising; however, as I have discovered over the last few years, it is certainly surprising to many.

I have already written a number of dry academic accounts of the research, so here I have taken the liberty of writing something a little more narrative in describing the research.

About four years ago, I approached my to-be-PhD supervisors with an idea that I had been considering for some time; would they be willing to supervise a quantitative research project, investigating whether the earlier-reading state school pupils maintained an advantage in reading over their Rudolf Steiner school peers? To my delight, both Dr Elizabeth Schaughency and Associate Professor Elaine Reese agreed.

The research initially began with three ages of children (in their first, third or fifth year of school), in three state, and in three Rudolf Steiner schools in the South Island. After months of working with children in both types of schools, I was frequently struck by the way in which the young five and six year-old state school children could work their way through texts, usually quite fluently, whereas the Rudolf Steiner pupils showed very little interest in doing so. I often wondered how such an initial gap in reading could ever be closed.

After the beginning phases of visiting schools and working with the children and teachers, we had collected enough data for reliable preliminary analyses (this particular study was conducted over two full school years, thus the complete findings were some time away). To my astonishment, at

that early stage in the project, it was still possible to observe that the reading achievement of the Rudolf Steiner pupils, on average, seemed to 'take off' somewhere between Class III and V.

At this point, I began to second guess the patterns emerging from the results. Was the sample of Rudolf Steiner pupils going to be large enough to trust the findings? Or perhaps one of the classes in the study was a 'freak' class (e.g., particularly intelligent), skewing the data?

At this point, a second study was conceived to firm up the available evidence. This second study focused on a new sample of 11- and 12-year-old Year 7 state school students and Class VI pupils from around New Zealand. Specifically, pupils from the Dunedin, Christchurch, Motueka, and Hawke's Bay Steiner schools were involved. The results from this project corroborated those of the, still underway, earlier study - the state and Steiner school pupils were again reading at a similar level!

By the end of the research, we had extensive data from around 400 pupils and, after taking account of differences in children's school and home environments, as well as developmental differences, such as language ability, the data robustly suggested that by around age ten, there was no difference in reading achievement for later and earlier beginning pupils.

As I began to shift my attention to writing about these findings for academic publication, I realised that more research was still needed. Isolated findings without rationale and supporting evidence are often not treated kindly in academia.

I began to search for published data from the famous international studies (e.g., PISA). To my surprise, such rich data sets had only been quantitatively analysed and published once before (and in a methodologically problematic manner at that) with respect to looking for an effect of earlier

reading instruction. After I had taken account of differences in countries' economic, educational and social development, the analyses found no advantage, by age 15, attributable to beginning formal schooling before age seven.

After many setbacks, a few good turns of fortune have recently occurred. Most notably, my fear that the findings would remain marginal, frowned upon and at best only aired in the Waldorf movement, was allayed. The thesis examiners were enthusiastic, recommending that the thesis be placed on the University's list of exceptional theses. This provided hope that the findings could one day be palatable to academia.

Moreover, staff at the press office of the University were personally and professionally very interested in the findings and subsequently wrote a press release. The story ran strongly in mainstream media in New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, also overseas.

It was particularly pleasing for me that people involved in early childhood education-according to feedback received-have taken these findings, by and large, as a relief. Many have felt frustrated at societal pressure to teach young children to read. It is perhaps also fair to mention that national literacy-based standards in education for young children would appear empirically questionable in the light of this research also. Finally, a clear benefit exists for Steiner education; now empirical data exist supporting the Waldorf approach to reading.

I would like to end by giving my heartfelt thanks to all of those who assisted with the research, the children, parents, and teachers who took part, and those who have taken an interest. The entire experience has added to my conviction that-and as I understand Steiner repeatedly asserted-with care and rigour, many of the assertions of Spiritual Science can be tested with conventional scientific methodology.

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