

Dig Deeper, Relate Wider
Senior School – Buran Nalgarra

“The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens “ Rilke

Could there be a more dire time to be alive, could there be a more transformative time to be alive? Rilke’s quote suggests that the future is already within us, transforming itself in us, and present in generative form. In my view, this insight from Rilke can speak to the ancient and also contemporary emerging worldview, of the entanglement and inter-relationship of all life, where the wellbeing of one is connected to the wellbeing of the whole.

In our times, both socially and environmentally, the life systems of the planet are depleted to what scientists speak of as tipping points, and we are beginning to comprehend the extent to which this impacts everything in existence. At the same time, it seems to me, the emergent consciousness of entanglement and inter-relationship, is enlivening our motivation and capacity to dig deeper - relate wider, to be responsive to the urgency of these crises. Is this a future that has entered into us and is transforming itself in us? How can education be at the truth and heart of this futures oriented transformation?

The colonial capitalist story of progress and profit for some at the expense and exploitation of others has surely run its course. A new narrative is needed which includes schooling that cultivates radical (to the root) transformation of who we in the western world paradigm think we are and how we imagine who we are becoming. What is needed is schooling which centres relationships of care and reciprocity in every aspect of our entangled lives; ecological in feeling, global in consciousness and localised in practice. The United Nations Sustainability Goals and the Declaration of a Decade of Restoration provide a collective orientation that can also be implemented locally, participant in the diverse ecologies and communities in which we live. For the systemic change that is needed, schools need to be at the heart of this restoring and restoration.

In sensing into and cultivating our capacities to transform the problematic aspects of our western mindset, and to authentically care for the wellbeing of others and our planet, nature, and First Nations people, are two of the most significant “teachers”.

In the symbiotic relationship of mycorrhizal network and forest, of zooanthellae and coral reef, we have living imaginations for how we can educate ourselves and our children into ecological understandings that shape our relationship to the world around us. Nature imaginations for ecological restoration abound.

First nations knowledges that are embedded in relationships of reciprocity, adaptability and spiritual connection, inspire all who live on Country to do so considerate of the wellbeing of the whole. Cultivating participatory thinking, feeling and living in our schools, inspired by First Nations perspectives and experiences, in what we teach and how we teach, are pragmatic wisdoms needed to unfold individual and planetary wellbeing futures.

Steiner education in its mycelial philosophical undergrounding, is in essence about healing, embedding children and young people in the ecologies of place, while drawing from the confluence of world wisdom streams to deepen our humanity. In the story wisdom of the Buddha, typically shared in a Steiner School, here is one who has experienced life in animal and human forms, and who returns to incarnation by choice because out of compassion, they cannot separate themselves from the sufferings of other beings. This is a beautiful ethic for the gestating in the present, of a kinder and fairer future.

Yet in practice, Steiner Schools are complicit in the harms, the systemic violence and privilege for some at the expense of others, that is characteristic of our dominant western world. How could it not be so? We are schools within the societies that give shape to mindsets that maintain the status quo, privileging some while marginalising others, and usually without consciously realising to what extent this is so.

Throughout my close to 30-year journey as a teacher in Steiner education, I have challenged and sought to address and transform what I have recognised to be the stereotyping, the privilege, the exploitative relationships to environment and people that are implicit to our western mindset including its tentacular threads in the Steiner mindset. From my earlier days as a “Steiner” parent, I held concerns about what I perceived to be stereotyping of gender

roles and the story/language focus on hero and conquest. In my 23 years at Kindleshill School where I was a founding teacher and now am principal, this has broadened to include decolonising story and language, and bringing feminist and ecological perspectives to curriculum, teaching practice and community building.

In starting Kindleshill School at the turn of the 21st century, the intention was to drop the typical form of “Waldorf” education that has developed over time, and to work from Rudolf Steiner’s original educational principles and pedagogy that are universally applicable in supporting the healthy growth and development of children and young people. We wanted to do this specifically in the context of our local geographical place and community, and in a relationship to what the spirit of the early 21st century was inviting. Our book, *Kindling the Light* is a 21-year celebration of this journey (published in 2021).

Currently, Kindleshill School is a Steiner kindergarten, primary and junior high school situated in Wentworth Falls. It is a short stroll from a beautiful lake and is embedded in complex ecosystems where water and breath are manifest in waterways, forest and mist. As a School we seek relationships with the diverse peoples of our region and extend our classrooms into community in a variety of ways. As part of this, we acknowledge we exist on land unceded by Dharug and Gundungurra nations. In 2017 we accepted the invitation to walk beside First Nations people and are committed to the work of enacting The Uluru Statement of the Heart.

Kindleshill turning 21 was a time for celebration and also reflection on what would be the next phase in our school’s unfolding. A significant outcome of this process is starting a senior school in 2024 that is non-HSC, non-ATAR and that is in pedagogical ethos and practices, a schooling responsive to the needs of our time and place. Essentially, we will cultivate through both content and pedagogy, the capacities in young people to give direction and purpose to their lives within a focussed ecological and socially just frame.

The Senior School program is called Buran Nalgarra, essentially meaning strength, and learning *through* togetherness. The elder Buran is the stringybark tree. Nalgarra refers to the twisting together of the strands of bark to make resilient twine and is a living picture of the strength and learning that comes of our collective focussed endeavours. The learning is guided and unfolding, around generative transdisciplinary themes that are relevant and meaningful to participation in shaping global – local futures.

For example, our initial study is a transdisciplinary theme that asks, “What do we need to know and do to repair and restore/restory our world? How do we change hearts and minds to effect change?” It includes a geographical enquiry into climate change in our local place, understanding community and cultures, the critical reading and analysis of texts related to place, as well as composition and creative communication, all through an ecological or eco-literacy lens.

For each thematic study there is engagement with a local “Problem that Matters” where students collaborate with teachers and wider community members, as action researchers. In this process, the students develop skills in investigation, critical thinking, collaboration, communication with the goal of effecting change, in a real world and meaningful context.

Projects additional to the “Problems that Matter”, include learning Dharug Dalang, the language of place, and learning and practising permaculture in a community context. Another project, Grandmother Walking, is the opportunity to walk some of the pathways carved by water in our Blue Mountains environment, exploring the intersection of culture and ecology with industry and the impacts of climate change. In all of these, we hope to listen, we hope to fall in love, we will learn how to grieve and how to celebrate. For to love country, is to walk in relationship with her.

Our Year 10 students have this year worked with a “Problems that Matter” community engagement project as a pilot for Buran Nalgarra, our Senior School program. We initiated this project with the question, “Can we make an impact in reducing single use plastic in our community waste stream?” We began our action research on Country with a Dharug artist and custodian asking, “What would it mean to him to have one less collective item of single use plastic on country, in our waterways?” Chris Tobin’s response took us to a generous feeling of belonging on Country, and woven into this, our reciprocal responsibility to Country.

We narrowed our action research focus to reducing the 2-litre plastic milk carton, a typical daily household item. Students calculated the statistics around the consumption of 2 litre plastic milk cartons in our region for one year and created a visual image to convey the staggering statistic. This was an 8-story building the area of a tennis court, filled with 2-litre plastic milk cartons; the approximate volume of one year’s milk consumption in our Blue Mountains region is 3.84 million litres! In science, the students discovered replacing plastic

with glass bottles would come with its own sustainability issues. The students also surveyed business owners and people on the street; businesses and consumers were all willing to reduce plastic as long as there was no significant cost to them.

At this stage, the students devised and performed at a local festival, a spoken word piece that reflected their questions, their insights, and the barriers present in themselves and others to effecting change. They also created an artwork for Winter Magic Art Street titled The Liar Bird, the lyre bird being the iconic composer juxtaposed with the Liar Bird's lies that consumers are fed to keep the plastic production rolling.

Further along, we have landed with a plan to seek funding that will support the cafes in Katoomba Street to convert to a refillable bladder system for the milk that swirls into the significant number of coffees purchased each day. A street going 2-litre plastic milk carton free, is a replicable model for other towns. The cafes are keen as is Council. It is a work in progress and students have begun collaborating with Council, with funding bodies, with a Sydney designer and manufacturer, as well as with café business to bring the plan to fruition. The students have been invited to the NSW Parliament to pitch their project to our local Member, Trish Doyle, in the hope of securing funding.

Enter the murmuration. In 2023, our whole School thematic inspiration is the murmuration. Nature our wisest teacher, demonstrates the agility of collective responsiveness to threat in the winged coherence of the murmuration. Each person influences the nearest six around them and each of these influences the six closest to them and so on. Our "Problems that Matters" project to reduce single use plastic takes its inspiration from the murmuration and from a care for one another and for Country, in our entangled and inter-connected lives. Our hope is to effect a change in our local place that inspires others to do so also.

The final Year 12 transdisciplinary thematic study of our Buran Nalgarra, Senior School program is called Imagining Futures. Students ask, "What is the vision for the future in our community? Is it ambitious enough?" Students ask, "What futures can we imagine and enact that empower us to live well individually and socially amidst the crises of climate change, of structural exploitation, discrimination and disadvantage? And what can we learn from those who are marginalised in our making change to effect better futures?" "This Problems that Matter" community engagement project is envisaged to lead to something

like the creation of a Futures Festival, or a civic ceremony whereby you become a citizen of place, of community in a way that is meaningful and specific to global consciousness, enacted locally.

The thinking behind Buran Nalgarra, harks back to the beginnings of Kindlehill, where we let go of the form of what we thought a Steiner School was and worked essentially with the indications for child development provided by Rudolf Steiner. In my view, the approach in this Senior School program does this too. It unpacks the status quo worldview and structures of our western world, develops thinking and imagination, and it empowers creative, engaging and fair participation for a life well lived in relation to others. As then, so we continue to be contemporary, place based, listening in to the spirit of our age and what needs to be generative for the future wellbeing of our planet.

Ngurra, is the Dharug word for Country, it encompasses the being of place, of breath, creek, tree and bird, critter and swamp, of warmth and story. Can we let Country “enter into us, transform itself in us,” as a genuine collaboration with place and community in our schools for a kinder and fairer future? My sense is it is already within us if only we give our attention to this.

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