Podcast Transcript

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Reagan White (RW) – Education Manager at Mumbulla School for Rudolf Steiner Education, Bega

(SC) Hello, I’m Sue Cairns, Education Consultant in the Student Services Team at AIS New South Wales. Today, I will be chatting with Reagan White, Education Manager at Mumbulla School for Rudolf Steiner Education in Bega, on the far south coast of New South Wales. Over the summer many of the staff, students, and their families, were impacted by the devastating bushfires. Having started on a slow road to recovery, they are now facing a new challenge in this pandemic and how they adapt to a new way of learning. As you listen to Reagan, you will hear the different strategies they are using to provide learning from home for students; both for families, with access to technology, and those without. Reagan also describes the ways they are continuing to connect with parents. She also discussed how the school is continuing to provide support for students with additional needs, particularly with regards to the delivery of intervention programs. Reagan is honest in her reflections, and I’m sure you too will admire her resilience and resolve to adapt to these changing circumstances. I hope you enjoyed my chat with Reagan as much as I did.

(SC) Good morning Reagan. How are you?

(RW) Well, thanks Sue. How are you?

(SC) Good. Reagan, tell us the school that you are from and you are Educational Manager of.

(RW) I’m the Education Manager of Mumbulla School for Rudolf Steiner Education in Bega, on the far south coast of New South Wales.

(SC) Reagan, your community has certainly had some great traumas in the last few months. Tell us a little bit about the impact of the bushfires and now the Coronavirus.

(RW) Well Sue, obviously the summer that we had was an extraordinary summer and we had many people in, not only our school community, but the wider community, that were affected by the loss of homes or property and certainly displaced, a lot of displaced people. Our school community was also affected, and we helped support our families as best we could. During that time and it was very tricky for teachers coming back and children coming back to school after this unusual summer and after being displaced over that time. So we were really conscious of supporting those children in the transition back to school at the beginning of the year, and we
spent a lot of time in our professional development early in those first two days of PD before school went back in looking at the welfare of our staff, but also the welfare of the family and how we can best support them. So, a very creative approach I think, that the teachers took. We had Shelley Davidow who came down and did an in-service with our teachers and looked at how we can help the children to process all the traumatic events because it was very full on. Just the environment itself was really harsh, you know, there was a lot of smoke and a lot of fear from day to day and most children, or a lot of children and staff, were evacuated from their homes over serious lengths of time and so we were really focussed on that, and then, of course, a few weeks into the term, and now we were faced with this next big event, which is unprecedented. I mean, we grow up in Australia and we know about fire. I mean, that's something that is sort of familiar in a way. But a pandemic is something that none of us have ever, I think, thought about in our lifetime and certainly from a school, how do we manage it?

(SC) Reagan, when did you move to remote learning at Mumbulla?

(RW) We moved to remote learning so that we had three weeks of it before the New South Wales school holidays began. We gave our teachers three days, and a weekend really, to essentially prep through all of that. We gave parents a warning on the Sunday that potentially next week we would be looking at the school having to close the face-to-face learning because of COVID-19.

So then on the Monday, we were up and rolling with hard copy material packs that the parents could come and collect from school, and then we had trained up, in the three days that we had, we had trained up teachers how to use, well, they taught each other really, OneDrive, and getting all the links and download all the materials. Our teachers have done an absolutely phenomenal job; it just exceeded all expectations in my mind. There is video, there's audio, they were still doing the blackboard drawings. Being outside of school they were still sending those to children so they can see, you know, what the blackboard is and what the new main lesson is, and we obviously altered some of the main lessons, ones that were more hands-on and practical in terms artistical. We had to sort of move around a little bit of the curriculum for some classes, but not many.

The initial response to be honest from parents, there has been a mixture of “this is absolutely incredible”, like one parent just ringing a teacher in tears just to say, “this has brought me to tears, to see the material that you managed to put together for my child in that time”. It's just incredible and also on the flip side of that “Oh my goodness, I can't manage this, like, I'm not going to be able to get through any of it”. And both of those are really valid reactions from parents, both of those reactions, I think, all of us are going up and down with this thing, like, “this is amazing, we can do all of this” or “I can't do any of it”.

(SC) How have your teachers supported those families who are feeling completely overwhelmed by that, and particularly if their child may have some struggles with learning?
All our teachers have had pretty much 24/7 contact with parents. So they've been able to be contacted on their mobile phones, they have been able to Zoom, with video conferencing, they have had parent meetings with the whole class, or half the class actually, they've done two halves where all the parents got together and sort of, partly social, partly with the teacher as well to say, “What's happening? Give us some feedback. How are you managing?”, and I think that really helped. To just say, “Oh gosh, I'm not the only one out here struggling with this” or, “Oh ok, that's a great idea, I can do it like that as well”, and just to share those ideas around how to do this remote learning from home.

Reagan, with the students who have got more significant needs, how have the teachers managed to provide adjustments and support? And your Learning Support Teachers? What roles have they played?

We have two learning support teachers and they have divided up the children that they see. They see some for numeracy and some for literacy and they have continued to see those children one on one via Zoom meetings set up with the parents to be there to supervise as well, and so they've continued to do that sort of three to four times a week and do check-ins. Both sessions last for half an hour or so, and they work through the maths or the literacy, they hear the children read, they give them feedback, and they can talk to parents at the same time. So, they have really continued, rather than being in small groups, they've done them one on one. The children that, say for example, do MiniLit or MultiLit, which are the programs that we use for literacy in our school, they've done them one on one, continuing to listen to them read, and to check in on those.

Do you have any students with higher support needs that you've been able to continue to support?

Yes, we do. We have several children actually from Kindergarten through to Class 4 in our school at the moment. For our younger children, we have continued to support them at school, so the class teacher is continuing to come into school. There's one example I'm thinking of where the teacher comes in two days a week and the child only comes two days a week at the moment because he is still only five. He's doing sessional school so she's been coming in and supporting him for two days with her assistant. Then another Kindergarten teacher has been seeing a child with special needs as well and also preparing materials and video materials, putting together signing books with video accompaniment so that he can continue doing that at home. We also have a child who the teacher has continued to see, she is slightly older, who is still coming to school and her assistant, who she works with very closely, is continuing to see her one on one and going through the remote learning of that class. And one of the reasons that that's really important for that child is the familiarity of being able to still be in her classroom and coming in every day. That routine is really important because to re-establish that would have been a huge process to go through when this was all over, so we just kept that going. For us as a school we
have felt like we have really supported those families as best we can in these circumstances. Now with the idea of moving to a phase where children are sent to school, a staged return, we will just keep supporting our families, you know, both on an individual basis and at school. Throughout all of this we have also stayed open for supervision for our essential services families.

(SC) Do you have families that don’t have internet access or devices?

(RW) Yes, we have and we’ve provided devices to those families. With the way that we’ve set up our remote learning, Sue, internet isn’t actually essential. They can download all the material that they need at school, when they come and pick up materials. So we’ve done it so that every Friday, which is what we figured it out, obviously this wasn’t perfect when we first rolled it out in the first week we’ve finessed it as we’ve moved along and got feedback, which has been fantastic. Parents, we just said, “Please tell us what’s working, what’s not working” and they’ve told us and that’s terrific. When they’ve come into school to pick up the hard copy materials on the day that they’re ready. It was just we’ve now figured out that it’s best if they’re all ready on the same day. So that means that parents can just filter through. They come through the hall, pick it up, and come back out again. Then at the same time, if they have lack of internet at home, they can actually download that folder for their class at the same time that they’re there, so it’ll be ready at the same time. So all the audio and the video and the support materials to say this is the teacher talking through everything that needs to be done for that week can be downloaded at the same time, and then they just have the folder there on their desktop when they go home and they’ve got it. And we will give devices to families that don’t have enough. Because this is the other thing, family, you know, they might have two children in high school and one in primary school and suddenly you need to have three devices.

(SC) That’s right.

(RW) We’ve tried to make it that our stuff isn’t internet dependent. So, once it’s downloaded, it’s all there and parents can print it off. If they are having trouble because they don’t have printers at home, then we will print it off for them so they can just collect it at the front office.

(SC) Reagan, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this podcast and I look forward to seeing you at Mumbulla.

(RW) I will look forward to seeing you too. Thank you so much.