

13 November 2008

To: Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

Submission in relation to the proposed Schools Assistance Bill 2008.

We commend the Minister, Julia Gillard, for the accountability required in this Bill by non-government schools. This Bill will assist in bringing equity and transparency to the nation's education sector. The National Curriculum will ensure nation-wide teaching and learning standards are met and that all children have the skills and knowledge they need to lead productive, rich and rewarding lives.

Concerns in relation to exceptions – Steiner (Waldorf¹) curriculum and teaching

We are, however, deeply concerned about any exceptions to this Bill for "alternative" curriculum programs, particularly Steiner. There are over 45 Steiner non-government primary and secondary schools in Australia. In addition there are 10 Steiner "streams" in government schools in Australia, of which seven are in Victoria. These Steiner streams in government schools are a bit of a problem – if this committee deems an exception to be applied to non-government Steiner schools, how will this be managed in government schools?

The information we provide here in relation to Steiner schools applies equally to non-government schools receiving public monies to teach outside accepted practices and with dubious content. We question the practices and teaching of "fundamentalist" schools that teach creationism as fact, and "steep" their entire curriculum with religious and wacky ideas.

Steiner education does not provide high-quality education for children

Steiner education is founded on spiritual not educational principles and concepts. The Steiner curriculum is structured around the spiritual philosophy of 19th century philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, called Anthroposophy; "spiritual science".

Steiner's theory of child development is based on reincarnation, karma, "the etheric body," and "the astral body." He believed that children pass through three spiritual stages, and the third stage (from age 14 to 21) is when "the astral body is drawn into the physical body, causing puberty".²

Children are categorized in the classroom and taught according to the "Four Temperaments": choleric, melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic.

Steiner believed that human development took place in epochs and that African and Asian peoples were less advanced forms of the development of humanity. He states that the only people who are spiritually developed to further advance humanity are the European races. For example his 1922 lecture 'Health and Illness' states, "Blond hair

¹ Steiner schools are referred to as Waldorf schools in the United States and Europe.

actually bestows intelligence.....If the blonds and blue eyed people die out the human race will become increasingly dense”. In another lecture he refers to Asian religions as containing the “Luciferic element” and in order to have any further use to humanity they need to be cleansed of this and replaced with what he calls “the Christ impulse”.

As the Steiner curriculum is based on the spiritual development of the child it is not in line with contemporary understandings of child development and how children learn. In Victoria, no Steiner stream in a government school or any non-government Steiner school, is compliant with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS).

The curriculum does not embrace contemporary understandings of history, science and the use of technology and does not reflect contemporary social, moral and ethical values. It includes the following elements:

- Deliberately delayed literacy and numeracy – Steiner students do not learn to read and write until age 7 or sometimes later, this is due to Steiner’s ideas that children should not learn to read before their adult teeth come in. As the Steiner Schools in Australia website says: “Early intellectual awakening can result in a weakening of the child’s vital forces, manifesting in frequent colds or other illnesses.”²
- Information Communications Technology (ICT) is not undertaken at all in the primary years. As the Steiner education in Australia website says: “Computer skills of all types are becoming more necessary in today’s world. However, we do not believe it is appropriate or relevant for children to become involved with them from a young age. Electronic media is not used in the classroom.”¹
- Science teaching is not rigorous, sound or based on current scientific principles, but on the ideas of Rudolf Steiner³. Much of the teaching is based on pseudoscientific ideas and is at odds with: (1) physics’ model of the Atom; (2) chemistry’s theory of Periodic Law; (3) astronomy’s “Big Bang” theory; (4) geology’s “Plate Tectonics” theory; and (5) biology’s theory of “Evolution”.
- Steiner teachers have a close relationship with Steiner families; visits to family homes are common, and the watching of television and playing of recorded music are actively discouraged.
- Steiner advocates say that Anthroposophy is not taught to Steiner students. Yet, to become a Steiner teacher, teachers undertake a “Certificate in Anthroposophical studies” which includes the following subjects: “Evolution of Human Consciousness”, “Occult Science”, and “Towards the Consciousness Soul”.

² Overview of Steiner education, from the Steiner Schools in Australia website: <http://www.steiner-australia.org/other/overview.html>. Downloaded 12 November 2008.

³ Jelinek, D and Li-Ling, S. 2003. Does Waldorf offer a viable form of science education? A research monograph. California State University, Sacramento.

Research on the method

There has been little or no research undertaken on the Steiner teaching method and content in Australia.

When the principal of Footscray City Primary School, Laurie Krepp, wrote to the Department of Education about introducing a Steiner stream into the school, two curriculum officers from the Victorian Department of Education produced a report⁴.

It said:

“Steiner education would appear to be the antithesis of the philosophy of the Early Years programs which provides a structured framework for the development of literacy skills from Prep to Year 4”.

“Steiner education is based on a philosophy of cocooning children from the world”.

This report was ignored by the Principal, and ignored by the Victorian Department of Education, which has made no effort to monitor these alternative streams for dubious teaching practices since 2001. It has undertaken no research of its own on this curriculum in relation to current learning practice.

The University of Stockholm dumped their Steiner teacher training program in August this year saying that it lacked both a scientific foundation and diversity. Professor Nordlund who is Dean of the University’s Faculty of Natural Sciences was quoted in the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter saying of the teaching program:

“The literature listed in the curriculum conveys wrong conceptions of the natural sciences, worse than mumbo-jumbo”, states Stefan Nordlund. He went on to say “In parts, the students’ course literature is not simply unscientific. It is in fact dangerous, and it conveys misconceptions which are worse than muddled. We are supported by the Department of Natural Sciences as well as the Department of Humanities in taking this position.”

⁴ Report on Steiner Education, 2000. Pat Hincks and Jeanette Cook. Curriculum officers from the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training,

The French Inter-ministerial Anti-Cult Mission dealt with the Anthroposophical sect (http://www.miviludes.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/MILS_Report_2000.pdf). The following is an extract from that report:

Evidently, the worrying finding as concerns teachers, made by the Ministry of Education can be explained: teachers would not be recruited for their intellectual and pedagogical training, but on the basis of "their qualifying life course". They should, according to Steiner, influence children by the mastery of their temperament. "For the young child, up until the end of teething, the entire importance of education lies in the nature of the educator. Then, up to puberty, the essential factor is that the master be an artist capable of moulding life. It is only when the child reaches fourteen or fifteen that its instruction and education require the master to communicate to the child the actual knowledge which he has acquired."

So it is hardly surprising that the inspection report mentioned late development and doubts as to compliance with the Decree of 23 March 1999 on active methods. For Steiner, the child must first imitate, then imagine, and only acquire intellectual knowledge from adolescence. The educator is no longer a teacher, but someone whose "profession becomes a vocation, where human nature itself is led towards an awakening to life". Nor is it surprising to note the reiterated refusal of State control by all the Waldorf-Steiner schools throughout the world. By definition, one must "completely separate education from the life of the State and the economy. The social organisation of people taking part in education must not depend on any other power than those who are working in the field. Managing educational establishments and setting up courses and programmes must be the exclusive province of people who are teaching at the same time or have a spirit of productive activity in life. Each of these people would split their time between teaching or another activity which involves spiritual creativity and the management of the educational system". The school becomes an isolated cultural unit, outside of everyday life. This refers back to the thoughts of former pedagogues who believed that in creating an ideal microcosm they would transform the macrocosm and thus create a new man. How can one possibly be surprised by what seems to have taken aback the inspectors? Eurythmy, simplistic imitation and less developed stages of music which fills the "I" karma"? Or history seen as a series of myths feeding the imagination? In the field of health, the absence of vaccination is also surprising.

Results

Because non-government Steiner schools do not need to declare their academic results, we know little about how they track in relation to national benchmarks. However we do know how they track in government schools. At Footscray City Primary School, students' results have been on a steady downward track since the introduction of the stream in 2001. Recent NAPLAN results placed the school either below or at (in two instances) the state mean.

At another Melbourne state school with a Steiner curriculum, Mornington Park Primary School, up to 80 percent of Year 3 students failed to reach the standards for maths with a similar failure level of 70 percent recorded for Year 5 students. The school's annual report says that one of the explanations for the school's poor performance could be the increasing number of Steiner Year 3 and 5 students completing the test.

Because the data is not declared in relation to the teaching method in government schools, we have no idea just how much of an impact Steiner results have on the government school, however it would be fair to say the results would be likely to go down, as so many essential subjects are not taught or delayed. In many non-government and government Steiner schools, students undertake no testing at all, in fact they refuse to sit any tests!

How is the government going to manage this issue? If funding is linked to results, how will it cope with schools that do not sit the tests?

And how, in government schools, will the results be used? If Steiner students results are poor and drag down the results of the mainstream part of the school, will funding be cut to that school? If not, how will the funding be delivered? Will it be delivered only to the mainstream part of the school? What will the government do here?

Impost on the economy

The cost to the government of a curriculum based on dubious precepts cannot be overstated. For such a small group of students (less than 0.06% of students in the nation), the impacts can be large, and they include:

- Potential liability of not teaching children the basics of reading, writing and ICT
- Inability to diagnose students with learning difficulties at an early age, according to all the research regarding early years literacy.
- Potential liability of allowing teachers into family homes, to “guide” them in the precepts of Anthroposophical living in breach of state educational “Code of Conduct”.
- Potential cost to government schools of Steiner educated students moving into the system without a sound basis in required subjects.

The impact of Steiner streams in government schools

As stated, there are 10 schools in Australia offering a Steiner curriculum, the bulk of which are in Victoria. How is the government going to manage these in relation to the National Curriculum? If an exception is created for non-government schools, then does that exception apply to Steiner and other “alternative” streams (Montessori, Reggio Emilia and myriad others) in government schools?

Impacts on the mainstream part of Footscray City Primary School have included:

- Significant subsidisation of this “stream” to the detriment of mainstream students. At Footscray City Primary School, funds that have been diverted amount to over \$500,000 and similar subsidization has occurred in other schools.
- Despite money being spent on teacher professional development, Steiner streams in government schools do not currently meet the Victorian Essential Learning Standards
- Cross-fertilisation of dubious ideas and teaching practices to mainstream students at these schools, whose parents did NOT choose the Steiner curriculum

- Government schools have created links with the worldwide Anthroposophical movement, which we regard as breaching education legislation in regard to sectarian influences
- The introduction of “fees” into government schools paid by Steiner parents
- There have been numerous reviews, audits, plans and investigations into the Steiner stream since at Footscray City Primary School and Collingwood College all at the public expense and all making negative findings. Other reviews are currently occurring in the other government schools offering this stream. Yet, it continues.

The real cost of “diversity”

This committee should examine whether it is the government’s role to create exceptions and to fund schools of this nature in the name of “diversity”. Incorrect teaching of science, ignoring the teaching of literacy and numeracy, and encouraging children to develop “one view” of the world, whether religious or otherwise, does not assist them to lead rich lives, lives they have chosen to live, with ideas they themselves have formulated based on the very foundation of teaching: a spirit of curiosity and inquiry. Narrow teaching based on “one view” may make children increasingly judgmental of others.

As lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II wrote in ‘South Pacific’, a love story that tries to defy ethnic prejudices: “You have to be carefully taught, to lie, cheat, steal and hate”.

Yours sincerely,

Jenni Lans
Cornelius Chidlow
Susan Menzies

Attachments:

- *Questions about Steiner’s classroom*. Milanda Rout. The Australian. 28 July 2007.
- *The Delusional World Of Rudolf Steiner – Ian Hayward Robinson*

Printed July 28, 2007 09:53am AEST

Questions about Steiner's classroom

Milanda Rout | July 28, 2007

RAY Pereira could not believe what he was hearing. His son's teacher had just said his child had to repeat prep because the boy's soul had not fully incarnated.

"She said his soul was hovering above the earth," Mr Pereira said. "And she then produced a couple of my son's drawings as evidence that his depiction of the world was from a perspective looking down on the earth from above." "I just looked at my wife and we both thought, 'We are out of here'."

And so ended the Pereira family's flirtation with the alternative schooling method known as Steiner education.

After this extraordinary parent-teacher interview, the Pereiras withdrew their son and his brother from the inner-city Melbourne government school that ran the Steiner stream.

They are one of a number of families who have relayed strange Steiner experiences to *The Weekend Australian*, including claims that AFL football was banned because the "unpredictability of the bounce" would cause frustration among children; immunisations were discouraged; and students recited verses to save their souls in class.

The allegations come as more and more children attend Steiner schools, with the education movement celebrating 50 years since the first school was set up in Australia. There are now more than 44 private Steiner schools across the country, 10 programs in government-run schools and it is one of the fastest-growing education movements in the world.

But as Steiner moves into the state education system in Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, questions are being raised about the alternative approach.

Critics say that its philosophical basis is too religious -- even comparing it to Scientology -- to be in the secular public system.

But supporters deny Steiner education is religious and argue it is a holistic approach to learning.

The alternative curriculum is based on the teachings of 19th century Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who believed a spiritual world existed alongside our physical one.

Steiner founded anthroposophy, which believed that by deepening the power of thinking, people could become capable of experiencing "spiritual truths".

Supporters of Steiner are adamant anthroposophy is not taught to children, and that Steiner himself said the spiritual science was only for adults who chose to do it.

But parents and religious experts are concerned that Steiner teachers learn about anthroposophy in their training and these beliefs seep into the classroom. "What a lot of people don't get is that Steiner is based on a spiritual system not an educational one," says cult expert Raphael Aron.

"The majority of people who enrol their kids don't have a clue who Rudolf Steiner really is."

Dr Aron, who is the director of Cult Counselling Australia, said schools varied greatly in their adherence to Steiner's anthroposophy beliefs because of the decentralised nature of the system in Australia.

He said there was a lack of transparency in the schools and often parents were not told about what Steiner believed, making it not dissimilar to Scientology.

"We have been contacted by a few people who have come out of the Steiner system and say they are damaged and are seeking help," Dr Aron said.

Mr Pereira said he believed parents at Footscray City Primary School were deliberately misled about the role that Steiner's beliefs played in the classroom. "It is implicit in everything they do," he said.

Mr Pereira, who is from Sri Lanka, said his concerns about Steiner's racist beliefs were realised when his children were not allowed to use black or brown crayons because they were "not pure". He said Steiner teachers at the state-run school recommended they not immunise their children because it would lead to the "bestialisation of humans".

But Rudolf Steiner Schools of Australia executive officer Rosemary Gentle said anthroposophy was not taught to children, although teachers were introduced to the subject during their training.

"It has nothing to do with what is taught. It is just the approach to teaching," she said. "The teachers are given an anthroposophy background ... and it allows them to look into a child more deeply. You look at children as you would in a family. You strive to understand the child and recognise their emerging personality."

Ms Gentle said the spotlight was on Steiner education because of a "smear and fear" campaign being waged by a small group of people. "Steiner education has been a small, but respected part of the Australian educational landscape for 50 years," she said.

Under the system, students have the same "main lesson" teacher for the first six years and textbooks are not used in primary school. Computers are banned in the primary years and television is discouraged to allow children to develop their "senses in the physical world". Reading and writing is delayed until children have developed adult teeth -- at age seven -- to focus on developing the child's healthy body.

Anthroposophy lecturer Robert Martin, who trains Steiner teachers, said being aware of the spiritual side of life enriched the education experience. He said people had many different names for the spiritual world – arch angels, angels, intelligent beings and presence -- and they existed long before humans.

"I want to co-work with the angels," Mr Martin said. "These individuals are very advanced ... Our job is to co-work with the spiritual beings."

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The delusional world of Rudolf Steiner

Ian Hayward Robinson

The Steiner beachhead has succeeded due to the partisan lobbying by groups of acolytes who seek to provide a spiritually-based education for their children at the secular system's expense.

A religiously-inspired education practice insinuating itself into the Victorian state education system?

'Impossible!' you say. But it's happening right under our noses.

In a number of Victorian primary schools, cliques of parents have conspired to create so-called 'Steiner education annexes' subsidised by taxpayers' money, under the same roof as our normal 3Rs classrooms.

How can this be? We don't have Jesuit annexes or Madrasah annexes.

These religious incursions into our allegedly free, secular and universal education system have been permitted due to the cowardice of the Victorian Education Department, which is arguably not only the most vapid and limp section of the state bureaucracy but also the most rudderless and wasteful of taxes. Plainly there are no adequate checks and balances on its operations and spending.

A succession of Liberal and Labor ministers tried unsuccessfully to rationalise the education bureaucracy and bring it under control, but in the end they found the task beyond them and have been content to simply pump more money into the bottomless pit of education budget over-runs. Their vain hope was to plaster over any potential cracks.

In this kind of corporate atmosphere, officials follow the path of least resistance and acquiesce too readily to strident demands by community groups, rather than subject them to adequate scrutiny and risk public controversy by rejecting them if this seems appropriate. They would rather abandon the educational welfare of students than stand up to a campaign by determined propagandists.

So the system is extremely vulnerable to the kind of intrusion represented by Steiner annexes. Surprisingly, similar distortions of

the principles of public education to Steiner have not yet occurred.

The Steiner beachhead has succeeded due to the partisan lobbying by groups of acolytes who seek to provide a spiritually-based education for their children at the secular system's expense. Most of them seem to know little about Rudolf Steiner or his crazy theories on just about everything, but are sucked in by the superficially attractive rhetoric and egged on by the hard-core disciples of this weird early twentieth century German guru.

Part of the propaganda is that Steiner education is not 'religious' or 'spiritual'. It may be true that religion or spirituality are not overtly proselytised in Steiner annexes, although we can't be sure of this because there is little monitoring or evaluation. The whole basis of Steiner education, however, comes from Steiner's excursions into what he called 'spiritual' or 'occult science', which was code for him going into a meditative state, free-associating around a topic, and writing down the results of his ruminations as though they were incontrovertible truth. Using this method he came up with a number of amazing break-throughs in modern thought, such as the importance of burying stag bladders full of yarrow flowers in a field to stimulate the growth of crops!

The principles of Steiner education are certainly not evidence-based or the result of rigorous research. A perusal of the comprehensive world-wide educational data base, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), reveals only a handful of articles about Steiner, most of them anecdotal. One or two actual studies claim Steiner school students are 'more creative' or 'more imaginative' than students in mainstream schools, which is not surprising seeing the centrality of Steiner's idiosyncratic theories of art in his education system.

One would have thought that Steiner propagandists would have been keen to establish the credentials of their system by a series of well-designed and executed research studies, but this is not the case. There is virtually no hard information about what goes on in Steiner classrooms or on the effects of it on children's learning.

In eschewing such empirical studies, Steiner's supporters are really only following the guru himself. Steiner was highly dismissive of the 'trend of human evolution ... to validate judgements through visual observations' and believed a better guide to life was the 'reality of the human being's inner activity', by which, of course, he meant *his* 'inner activity', which he believed came from a universal source that he had tapped into.

If the sources of Steiner's educational ideas are not educational research, where do they come from? Although this is often denied, there is no doubt they come from Steiner's quasi-religious beliefs.

Steiner teachers don't say overtly that their system is religious, because then they wouldn't be allowed to teach it in state public schools and maybe wouldn't get as many takers for their dedicated schools. But the whole system is shot through with religion, whether the teachers admit it or even know it.

When the children study Indian mythology one year and Hebrew another and so on, they are not studying 'comparative religion', as one parent claimed, they are recapitulating the spiritual development of man as Steiner believed it occurred, from the mythical civilisations of 'Lemuria' and 'Atlantis', through the Egyptian, Indian, and Hebrew civilisations to its culmination in modern (i.e. early 20th century) 'Aryan' (i.e. German) civilisation. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers divide the development of the child into seven year cycles, this obeisance to the mystical number 'seven' is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers prefer white and blue to black and brown, this comes from his belief in an eternal battle for men's souls between good white 'angels' and the evil dark spirit Ahriman, who was and is trying to stop man's spiritual development. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers focus on different aspects of the person at different stages, this is based on his religious belief about humans having three bodies (the physical, the 'astral' and the 'etheric') that develop in a certain order at certain times. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers make children at a certain age paint on damp paper, which makes everything go fuzzy, this is because he believed their souls were not yet developed enough to cope with sharp distinctions. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

One could go on. Steiner education may not look 'religious' on the surface, but it is in fact a bundle of religious ideas dressed up as educational ones. This is what is insidious about it and this is why it has no place in the secular public system.

Steiner certainly thought his education system was an extension of his religious beliefs. He tells the teachers in his first school that 'by employing our methods we will harmonise the higher human being (the human spirit and soul) with the physical body (our lower [sic] being)'. Five years later he tells them: 'Every word and gesture in my teaching as a whole will be permeated with religious fervour' and talks about having 'educated children very naturally in a priestly way — what is really a religious devotion ...'.

This position has not changed since Steiner's death. A Steiner education website states: 'Anthroposophy holds that the human being is fundamentally a spiritual being and that all human beings deserve respect as the embodiment of their spiritual nature. This view is carried into Waldorf [Steiner] education ...' and another states: 'Rudolf Steiner's educational philosophy must be set within the context of his main endeavour - to address the latent possibilities in human beings of advancing beyond the present-day accepted limits of cognition to an awakening, by self-discipline and exercise, to a knowledge of the spiritual worlds underlying outer existence — higher worlds.'

It is no accident that the only extended discussions of Steiner education in the Australian broadcast media have been on the ABC's **religious** programs, *Compass* and *The Religion Report*.

Perhaps this spiritual bias doesn't matter if the educational benefits of the Steiner ideology are great enough to outweigh its dependence on a religious core. Steiner education is clearly not all bad, or it would not have gained the support it has. Steiner himself was not a dangerous guru in the mould of Jim Jones or David Koresh, although he did share with them one of the pivotal characteristics of gurus, an absolute and totally sincere belief in the truth of his delusional ideas — a strength of conviction that was a key to his ability to attract numerous followers. He was generally acknowledged to be a sensitive, kind, generous and

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very intelligent man but his basic ideas about the world are so obviously fanciful and delusional that to read them with any sort of critical intelligence is to dismiss them in dismay.

If some of his ideas on education have worthwhile lessons for us — making the arts more central, dealing with the whole person, being concerned with initiation into the culture and not just training in skills — these good things are vitiated by the stubbornness with which Steiner schools and teachers try to shoehorn children into the pattern pre-

determined for them by Steiner's cogitations. While its propaganda claims a central concern for individual differences, in fact what Steiner education does is to try to slot all children into the developmental pigeon-hole designed for them by Rudolf Steiner, within which there is only a small amount of room to move. Human destiny is seen as moving along pre-ordained paths and the Steiner teacher's role is to keep children on the fairly straight and relatively narrow as defined by Steiner. Life is not for self-fulfillment, but for fulfilling your Steiner-defined



spiritual destiny. There are unfortunate hints of German fascism in this.

There is much anecdotal evidence suggesting there are inadequacies in Steiner education in the key areas of reading and mathematics, but the situation is obscured because schools with Steiner annexes don't provide test results for the discrete parts of the school but lump the Steiner and mainstream results together.

Apart from the academic doubts, there are other concerns about having Steiner annexes as part of public schools. They effectively create two schools with different philosophies and approaches under one administrative framework, which places a huge burden on the already overworked school administrators and takes time and attention away from other more important educational tasks. Furthermore they often lead to the creation of a two-tiered system of opportunity for students. For example, at Footscray City Primary School, the Steiner students get taught instrumental music, while the mainstream students don't.

Typically, more and more resources get diverted from the mainstream into the Steiner annex. In some cases, School Councils are being taken over by Steiner parents so that reasonable requests from mainstream parents for things such as competitive sport and awards recognising student achievement are simply voted down. Because there is no cap on the percentage of students that can be included in such 'annexes' there is a danger that they may drive other parents away and eventually take over the whole school. This has already occurred at Melbourne's Collingwood Education Centre — there are no ordinary state school primary students in that school anymore — and there are reasons to suspect that elsewhere in Melbourne, Bentleigh East PS is going down the same road.

Because the Steiner parents form an organised and focused lobbying group, and often try to gain the collaboration of the school principal, there is an encroachment of Steiner's anthroposophical ideas and methods into the mainstream state school system.

Again in Melbourne at Footscray City PS, all children are being taught art by a Steiner teacher, and they work in class on and participate in what are effectively Steiner-inspired festivals under another guise.

Steiner concepts such as that competition is bad, that sport should be discouraged, and that play should be 'gentle' become imposed on the whole school. This means for example that at Footscray City PS the whole school no longer has things like a sports day or team sports and the playground has been converted into a set of 'non-violent' sandpits. Moreover, the school made the unilateral decision that all students should do craft with the Steiner teacher, without consulting the mainstream parents. The Principal's justification to a parent was that boys are 'difficult' and they would 'benefit' from the Steiner emphasis on craft.

There is clearly no evidential or experiential evidence for such ideas, nor for the many other gratuitous absurdities that riddle Steiner education, so any resemblance between Steiner education and good educational practice is purely coincidental. That a number of children have survived it, and some even thrived, says more about the resilience of the human spirit than about the efficacy of this empirically groundless theory.

Whether parents have the right to impose such aberrations as Steiner education on their children is a moot point, but it is absolutely certain that they have no right to exploit the state system so that other children are exposed to this nonsense. It is unconscionable that Victorian Education Department officials have allowed this to occur for so long. We must support the struggle to reaffirm the secular nature of public education.

- ▶ *The author acknowledges the assistance of Jenni Lans of Parents For Secular Education and a parent at Footscray City PS in the preparation of this article.*
- ▶ *For an earlier and more detailed discussion of Steiner Education, see: Ian Robinson 'The Rudolf Steiner Threat to Victorian Education', The Australian Rationalist, No 30, March 1992, pp 5–11.*

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