

Fairy-tale fallout

Rudolf Steiner’s educational philosophy has come under scrutiny in a racism row at a New Zealand Steiner school.

By Catherine Woulfe In Education

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Te Ra Waldorf School has mastered the art of first impressions. “Oh my God, you hear this all the time,” says former staff member Sophie Perkins. “You feel like you’re coming home. It has this very peaceful feeling about it. It is church-like, almost. They do it so well.”

If you visit in the morning, you’ll smell fresh bread being baked. The school bell really is a bell – not an alarm tone piped through speakers. You won’t see kids scoffing chippies or plugged into iPods, or wearing branded clothing. No: Te Ra is a place of greenery, of airy wooden buildings, a place for kids to be kids.

But two years ago, parents at this Steiner school discovered a darker side to the writings of Rudolf Steiner. They found what Perkins now considers to be “evil, evil white racism”.

Over an extraordinary few months, parents and staff left the school in droves. The school has no clear record of numbers. But those we talked to say the racism – and the way the school “vilified” those who spoke out against it – drove out six of Te Ra’s 35 staff members and more than 29 families. It was a huge hit for the roll, which is now 157.

Perkins spent more than five years working at Te Ra and sent her children there. “We’ve

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managed to get ourselves out of something,” she says. “It’s like being woken up – I felt like Snow White, I really did – I felt like the poisoned apple came out of my mouth and I woke up.”

Last month an official investigation commissioned by the Ministry of Education confirmed that aspects of Steiner’s writings are not compatible with the Treaty of Waitangi or New Zealand’s education system. In supporting documents, the investigator also notes “more specific evidence of racism”.

Some who left Te Ra now insist Steiner schools and kindergartens, attended by more than 3000 children across the country, have no place in New Zealand. They have serious misgivings about the fact that eight such secondary and primary schools are endorsed and funded by the Ministry of Education.

And after two years of turmoil, they are ready to tell their story.



State-integrated Te Ra Waldorf School: a racism row drove many families and staff members to leave. Photo/Hagen Hopkins

DIFFERENT AND PROUD

It’s important to understand from the outset, these parents and staff say, that what happened at Te Ra could have happened at any New Zealand school that embraces Rudolf Steiner’s writings and philosophy – and that similar sagas are playing out in such schools all over the world.

But in New Zealand it all blew up at Te Ra, a seven-classroom, decile-nine primary school on the Kapiti Coast. The school and its on-site kindergarten sit on 2ha in Raumatī South. This is Mana country, home base of Education Minister Hekia Parata.

Te Ra and the seven other Steiner or “Waldorf” schools in New Zealand are state-integrated. Te Ra has received more than \$200,000 a year over the past three years, which is topped up with annual “pledges” of \$1800-3000 a child from parents.

But Steiner schools pride themselves on being different from state schools, and from the mostly Catholic and Christian schools that share the state-integrated category.

The difference is anthroposophy. This is a controversial theory – some say a religion,



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although Te Ra school disagrees – conceived by Austrian philosopher and scholar Rudolf Steiner in the early 1900s. Although it is not taught to children, many say it dictates to an unusual extent what happens in these schools. “It determines what people wear, how they eat, how they garden, their architecture, what colour the classrooms are – everything,” explains Perkins.

The Steiner education movement is flourishing: there are now more than 1200 anthroposophical schools around the world, although in some countries they don’t receive government funding.

Here, taxpayer cash is also going to the specialised Steiner teacher-training centre, Taruna, in Havelock North, and to three Steiner “Hohepa farms” that home and support people with intellectual disabilities.



Te Ra Waldorf School. Photo/Hagen Hopkins

‘NOT HIPPIY-DIPPY’

So what’s so attractive about anthroposophy? Children stay in Steiner kindergartens until they are six or seven, and aren’t taught to read or write until about that age. The thinking is that this gives them a precious extra few years of childhood. Parents also like the fact that once they hit school, children are put in small classes and stay in that class, if possible with the same teacher, for their full seven years of schooling.

More bonuses: parents are heavily involved with the school and are encouraged to form tight friendships and help each other out; for example, by organising meal rosters for families with newborns. Teachers take it upon themselves to love and nurture their students as a parent would. Screen time and gadgets such as laptops and cellphones are frowned upon both at school and at home and there is a strong emphasis on the importance of play, gardening, wholesome food, art and handicrafts such as knitting and whittling.

“We’re not hippy-dippy people,” says Kym Murden, who was delighted to enrol her two children at Te Ra in 2010. The family had just moved from the UK, where she worked in the state education system as a case worker for children with special needs or who had been excluded from school.

Murden says that in Te Ra she saw “something a bit different, something a bit more wholesome, more playful, with more space around childhood”.

Once they enrolled their children at Te Ra, stranger aspects of Steiner’s thinking started to become evident to Murden and many others. Parents speak of a growing sense of unease and an intense feeling of isolation.

One odd aspect they noticed was that some staff actively discouraged children from writing with their left hands. Rudolf Steiner, they would later discover, believed left-handedness was something to do with “karmic weakness”, or exhaustion from a past life.

Principal Andrea Sorger, who took over from former principal Doris Zuur in January last year, now says left-handed children are not discouraged from using their left hand. However, “where a child’s ‘mixed dominance’ (for example, right-eyed, right-footed, right-eared but left-handed) was thought to be a possible factor in learning difficulties, consideration may have been given to switching writing hands”. Sorger says this would be done in consultation with parents.

But that wasn’t the only quirk the parents found concerning: they also discovered that Steiner believed children who were being bullied effectively deserved it – again, it was put down to karma.

Three years ago, a similar issue arose at West Auckland’s Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School, when parents of an eight-year-old girl complained she was tormented by bullies – one threatened her with an axe. After a complaint to the Human Rights Commission, the school agreed to pay the parents \$9000 and make an admission of failure.



Te Ra Waldorf School. Photo/Hagen Hopkins

STEINER’S RACIAL BELIEFS

For a long time, parents at Te Ra had wondered why this school with the Maori name was so Eurocentric. German was taught – unusual for a primary school. Parents say staff complained that kapa haka made children too energetic and resisted the suggestion that children might like to use poi. Sorger says they do make and use poi now.

Parents also found it odd that in the kindergarten and junior school, children were initially discouraged from using black or brown crayons. “It drove them crazy,” says one mother, who wanted to be known as Anna. “They were like, ‘But I need to draw the trunk of a tree!’.”

The crayon issue was also detailed by the *Australian* in 2007. Ray Pereira, a parent who pulled his child out of Melbourne’s Footscray City Primary School, told the newspaper “his children were not allowed to use black or brown crayons because they were ‘not pure’.”

The Te Ra principal says teachers differ in their “exploration of colours”. For example, as she explained to parents, in her class children started using primary colours before progressing to secondary (green, orange and purple) and finally tertiary colours – including brown and black.

Maori legends are a natural and core part of teaching in state primary schools, and are now told throughout Te Ra. But parents say they were initially told the legends were “inappropriate” or “too gory”. Instead it was all Nordic legends, Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm. “We would sort of joke about it,” recalls Anna, “how in all of the fairy tales, the princesses were always really blonde.” Parents complained about the content of some of these stories – including incest and the decapitation of babies.

The word “tribal” was bandied about. There were vague references to children evolving from

“childlike” or “tribal” states to “individual states”.

Halfway through 2012, it all started to make a horrible sort of sense. Parents browsing the school’s “parent library” stumbled across writings by Rudolf Steiner that shocked them. “Racist was the word they used,” says Perkins.

In hindsight, it’s surprising this row hasn’t arisen in New Zealand earlier. As the official investigation into Te Ra would later note, “accusations of racism have long dogged the Steiner movement. These are based on the assertion that Steiner believed different races were at different levels of a spiritual hierarchy, with ‘Aryans’ being the highest incarnation.”

His theory, in brief, is that our souls constantly reincarnate: if a person behaves a certain way, his or her soul will advance from the black-skinned or “primitive” races on through the emotionally governed “youth-like” Asian races. All going well, each soul eventually winds up in the bodily pinnacle of humanity: white skin with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Some who left Te Ra later told the investigator that in Steiner schools the idea of evolution through the races is echoed in the core approach to education: young children are thought to evolve in stages from a “tribal consciousness” to a more “developed” consciousness. The investigator wrote that the school’s Deed of Integration, signed in 1996, makes this link explicit.

Although this information is widely talked about online – including in forums for those who have left Steiner schools – the Te Ra parents, and even some of the staff, knew none of it. So when the books were discovered, word spread quickly. Parents started googling – and kicking themselves.

For Perkins, the books finally made sense of a couple of strange throwaway phrases that had been nagging at her since her formal training in anthroposophy. Even during that training, she says, the racial roots of Steiner’s thinking were never made clear.

Perkins is among many who now feel duped and guilty. “You know, I’m a well-educated person and yet I did not research this properly. It’s not hard – you just type a few words into Google and see what comes up. It’s a hard thing to carry, as a mother.”

She regrets not enrolling her children at a mainstream school earlier. “If I could give any parent advice, I would say get involved in your local state school, and if you’re concerned about it, make it better yourself. I’m terribly upset that I didn’t do that.”

Tanemahuta Gray was hired to teach basic te reo and tikanga part-time at the school in 2009, after parents called for more Maori content at the school. He says he spent about 40 minutes in each class each week and the children loved it. But he now wonders whether he was hired for appearances’ sake.

He and his wife happily placed their three young children at Te Ra too, but pulled them out because of the racism issue. Gray later quit. He too now regrets not checking out anthroposophy more thoroughly. “The information is out there if you want to do a little bit of extra research,” he says. “But you come in with such a good feeling. Why look up ‘Steiner + racist’? It’s just not part of your thinking.”

The distinctive architecture of the headquarters of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical movement in Dornach, Switzerland.



BITTER RECRIMINATIONS

After the racism claims surfaced, there were fraught meetings and shouting matches, sides were taken and friendships abruptly cut off. The tight school community tore itself apart. The investigator's report later found that, initially, "the problem was denied [by Te Ra] and those raising it were vilified to the point where their continued involvement with the school became untenable for them and for many others".

"We could not work with people who were willing to a) ponder it as possible truth or b) believe it outright," explains Perkins. "For me, it's very difficult to be with people who didn't stand up against it."

Some, she says, still perceive what happened as a personality conflict, or "just those Maori parents wanting a Maori school".

"It's absolutely not what happened. What happened was we came up against something which has many heads. It's very dark – it shouldn't be here in New Zealand. It shouldn't be in any country as an education system. And yet it also has this beautiful face on it."

It's a mark of how much those parents and staff had loved the school that for a long time they felt it would be a betrayal to take their concerns to officials.

But late in November 2013, Perkins and another former staff member, Krissy Dussler, lodged a formal complaint with the Minister of Education. They asserted that the education offered at Te Ra included Steiner's views about a racial hierarchy – and that those views were not simply historical, but held by some teachers and reflected in the curriculum.

GENUINE CONCERNS

The ministry moved fast. Helena Barwick, who is often sent in to troubled schools as a limited statutory manager, was instructed to return with the results of a preliminary investigation by Christmas. She found that the complainants raised "a genuine and valid concern". Although the school's initial response was inadequate, she found, during 2013 it took meaningful steps to address the concerns. The *Dominion Post* ran a small story. It all could have been left there.

But Perkins and Dussler campaigned for further investigation, insisting that the problem of racism in Steiner's writings is profound and systemic – and that it will not be easily fixed. They urged officials to delve into anthropology itself.

"No matter how complex or fraught with difficulty," they wrote to Barwick and Parata, "this investigation is essential to ensuring that the children

The Steiner headquarters. Photo/Getty Images

who attend Steiner schools receive the same protections as those in other state-funded schools ... Now that this issue has been brought to the ministry's attention we believe it is unacceptable to allow these dangerous and repugnant ideas to hide behind the 'special character' status of Steiner schools and its institutions."

Barwick continued her investigation at Te Ra. In March she met a group of parents and staff who had left the school and her report of that meeting is extraordinary.

"The racism is seen as both overt and covert. The covert racism is a paternalistic, condescending racism based on Steiner's belief that everyone is on a journey to becoming white. It is a very ingrained, racist theology. Once parents became concerned about the racism, they tried to find out more about what the teachers actually believe. It was difficult to find out, but what did become clear was that if you are in any way different – left-handed, Maori, differently shaped head – it marks you out."



Principal Andrea Sorger notes in a statement that Perkins and Dussler did not identify any instances of racist practice, and nor did the final report of the investigation. Perkins explains they were reluctant to give Barwick examples of how the racist aspects of anthroposophy filter into classrooms as they feared those, rather than the doctrine underpinning them, would get all the attention.

So how does the doctrine affect children? It is clear children are not explicitly taught anthroposophy. In her statement, Sorger also says, "We do not tolerate racism or any other form of discrimination" and "the racist statements that can be found in some of Steiner's lectures have no place at our school". A statement from the ministry says: "Rudolf Steiner schools would not be part of our education system if racist views underpinned their curriculum."

But in Perkins' view it is not just about the curriculum. She believes the racism in the writings manifests itself more subtly, affecting "how the teacher sees the child in front of them. And that must affect how they treat that child – and I know that it has."

In her final report, Barwick notes that this was the complainants' prime concern: "That those responsible for teaching and nurturing children at Te Ra and in other Steiner institutions in New Zealand are, by their training and background, imbued with a world view underpinned with a hierarchy of races that sees indigenous races as having lesser value. While this may be so for some or all of those teaching at Te Ra, there is currently no requirement or mechanism to audit the beliefs held by teachers in New Zealand schools."

Rosie Simpson, spokesperson for the executive of the Federation of Rudolf Steiner Waldorf Schools, points out that "most Steiner educators are also state-trained teachers, we also teach the New Zealand curriculum and so we're not operating in some Eurocentric wilderness as some commentators seem to believe".

Steiner teachers generally go through mainstream state training before undertaking specialised training. However, Simpson says there may also be paid tutors at schools teaching skills such as music or gardening – who would be supervised by teachers – and parents and grandparents helping with reading groups or handiwork classes. All of these people would be police vetted and subject to protocols.

Although no examples made it into the final report, at the March meeting, Barwick recorded what she called "more specific evidence of racism" provided by the parents and former staff. One

Maori child, she wrote, started telling her parent that she wished she had lighter skin and fairer hair. A family planning a trip to Fiji were told by the principal, "This is a really bad idea. It's the wrong environment, the wrong music, it's too primitive."

The parents and former staff also told the *Listener* they were aware of allegations of racism at other Steiner schools. Gray, for example, was informed of a "shocking incident" at a kindergarten in which a Pakistani girl was seated next to a fair-haired, light-skinned child so she could "better evolve".

"According to the teacher, being dark-skinned the daughter's soul needed assistance to move to the next racial manifestation. It was immaterial that her parents both held doctorates. Based on the family's skin colour, they were not evolved as highly as their white counterparts."

Simpson points out that the schools are independent of each other but maintain "healthy fellowship", just as state schools do. Further, Steiner education in New Zealand "is in a very healthy place".

"While Steiner's writings may give inspiration and direction, they are not a dogma," Simpson wrote in a statement. "Of course the federation disagrees that Steiner schools in New Zealand are bound to a fundamentally racist attitude inherited from Rudolf Steiner himself ... Steiner schools are committed to honouring diversity." She says Steiner educators "have a commitment to Te Tiriti specifically and generally".

Simpson notes that at Taikura School in Hastings, where she is principal, te reo and tikanga Maori have been taught since 1981. For the past 27 years, the school has employed a dedicated teacher of te reo, and all students from kindergarten through to Year 11 enjoy those lessons as well as the reo, waiata and games offered by their class teachers. "This is something to celebrate."

She said the federation would continue to offer support and guidance to Te Ra school.

"LUCIFERIC TENDENCIES"

One of Te Ra's challenges is to address what Barwick noted as "widespread concern over a culture of secrecy".

One example she cites was that the school periodically brought in medical doctors trained in anthroposophy to examine "difficult" children referred by teachers. A former staff member remembers a doctor concluding that indentations on a boy's temples were an indication of "embedded immorality". Another boy was described as having "Luciferic tendencies". Parents gave their consent for these examinations but results were given to teachers, to pass on if they saw fit. That was odd, but the big worry, parents would later point out, was the potential for teachers to treat the children differently based on such diagnoses.

Kym Murden describes herself as "quite a ballsy woman" but says she found the "veneer" of Te Ra impossible to break through. Her questions and complaints were always brushed aside.

"It's like you walk in there and you get a tin of treacle chucked over you ... It's a very closed system and they feel very defensive and very threatened if anyone questions anything."

Parents told Barwick and the *Listener* that classrooms were "sacrosanct" and they were never allowed inside – yet teachers would visit their homes. Material recently removed from the school website says these visits happen at least twice in a child's school career, and "the main purpose of the visit is to see the child in their home environment".

But the parents say teachers came to check that they were limiting technology use, as per the school's policy that cellphone use "has been shown to have adverse health effects on growing children" and that screen time leads to "a deadening of thought life".

The website material said teachers liked to visit at bedtime so they could talk privately with the adults. But Anna says teachers also liked to see where the child slept "so that they could meditate on that at night". The Te Ra principal says that is "a very bizarre claim, and we reject it". She says parents are allowed inside classrooms.

One parent told Barwick: "We all scurry around trying to prove we are worthy. Parents are on the back foot right from the start." That, says former teacher Robert Dussler, was well-

intentioned – but worrisome. Dussler and his wife, Krissy, were involved with Te Ra on and off from the year after it opened in 1996, and he worked as a class teacher for two years before leaving in July 2013.

Although the federation's Simpson says that in her experience Steiner teachers are “deep, independent and critical thinkers”, Dussler believes those who have trained in anthroposophy are convinced they have a privileged understanding of children and education. “There is a very strong belief of ‘Rudolf knows best’ that is very pervasive. I thought that as well ... You feel that you are obviously wiser than the parents who come with their higgledy-piggledy ideas.”

As Barwick put it: “The school promotes the idea that they have a special and secret knowledge of child development, and that if you take your child anywhere else you will be exposing them to risk. This is powerful for many parents and plays on parents' insecurities.”

Dussler says the reaction of some parents to this treatment was “thank God, I'm giving my child into the most loving and wise hands they could possibly be in. I can stop worrying.” The problem with that is “you're giving your power away, you're handing it over. You become very vulnerable without really ever consciously making that clear to yourself.”

Dussler and others who spoke to the *Listener* firmly believe everyone at Te Ra thinks they are acting in the best interests of the children. But he was surprised at the degree to which some simply would not entertain any critique or investigation of anthroposophy.

He calls Steiner “a brilliant salesperson”. Part of the pitch was that he wrote so much that devotees develop “a certain tolerance for [their] own limits of understanding ... It's really difficult to feel that you have true authority in interacting with this material.”

Further, Te Ra and its strong emphasis on community fulfilled a basic psychological need to belong. Teachers and parents were “enchanted” by the school and by anthroposophy.

“It's wonderful to have purpose and meaning that runs so deep, the validity of which is shared with all those around you ... You don't switch on your critical faculties and think, ‘Well hang on, what does this mean?’ Simply put – the guard was down from the outset.”

One parent told Barwick they had investigated the characteristics of a cult and were distressed to find that anthroposophy met many of the criteria, including having an iconic, charismatic leader, a prescription about the afterlife, rituals to enforce membership, secrecy, exclusivity of membership and being ostracised if you leave. This view is shared by many of those who left Te Ra and schools like it overseas.

Asked about the feeling that the school functioned as a cult, and about the “culture of secrecy”, Te Ra principal Andrea Sorger responded that the school's partnership with whanau is “central to the success of the education we offer”. “We are not a cult, we are just a school,” she wrote in a statement. “Our goal is to support our children to meet their potential ... We involve our parents and community in the life of the school ... We have worked to improve communication at all levels and believe we have made good progress.”

TE RA MAKES “SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS”

Last month, Helena Barwick delivered her final report. It is marked “confidential” and the school is contesting aspects of it. Sorger says that means she cannot comment in detail on its findings.

She is quoted in the report as saying: “Every Steiner school is doing work on this. The racism in the source texts cannot be undone; what matters is what we do with it and what we don't do with it.”

Barwick found that the school has made significant progress since its initial poor handling of the problem in 2012. She highlights its work to review its curriculum and special character guidelines, and to develop teachers' cultural competencies and the way the school works with the community.

“Te Ra school has acknowledged the issue and is working to ensure that no racist ideology is reflected in the curriculum or in teaching and that the school embraces and promotes the bicultural nature of New Zealand.”

But Robert Dussler and Sophie Perkins are worried that all of these moves will just “window

dress” the underlying racist aspects of the Steiner ethos. ““It’s got nothing to do with the issue; in fact all it does is make it more unsafe, because then you have this school that comes across as amazingly bicultural,” says Perkins. “And behind that you have the philosophy of anthroposophy, which believes in reincarnation through race and the hierarchy of race. I mean, it just makes it worse.”

Barwick’s report notes that similar views are held by all the staff and parents she met. They told her “no review of the curriculum or the pedagogy conducted by the school is going to be adequate, because the school can and will only be able to look through the lens of anthroposophy and will be not be able to stand outside it in order to critique it”.

The report concludes: “The concerns raised by Sophie Perkins and Krissy Dussler have substance and they are part of a worldwide issue. The writings of Rudolf Steiner are at the heart of the special character of Te Ra school, protected through the integration agreement, and some aspects of those writings are not compatible with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and New Zealand’s education system.”



Tanemahuta Gray taught te reo at Te Ra school but pulled his three young children out and quit.

FURTHER INQUIRY WANTED

So where to from here? The parents and staff who left Te Ra are calling for a top-level inquiry into anthroposophy and whether Steiner schools can continue to be state-integrated.

“I think the ministry needs to take a stand and take a stand *now*,” says Tanemahuta Gray. “I feel ashamed that I taught for four years at a Steiner school without knowing the underlying philosophy about the place, although I am proud of what I gifted the students. However, I am even more concerned with the shame that the Ministry of Education should feel, funding a schooling philosophy whose “special character” draws on a racist theology.

“As New Zealanders, we have a responsibility to eradicate racism and its justification in our society.”

But Gray’s personal view is the schools have a right to continue. He points to the extreme example of the National Front. “They don’t get government funding, but they have rights to their belief.”

Kym Murden agrees, but points out another problem with state integration: “It gives it a seal of approval. Going into that school, maybe naively, I made the assumption that if the ministry is part-funding this school, it has checked it out.”

Other parents made this point to Barwick, saying state integration functioned as “an implicit stamp of approval from the Ministry of Education ...”

Robert Dussler believes the government, too, has been taken in by the attractive front of

anthroposophy and Steiner schools.

However, in a statement, the ministry says it is regularly in contact with the governing bodies of all special-character schools, including the Steiner federation. It insists “prejudice has no place in our schools and racism is not tolerated”.

Two years after the parents at Te Ra found those books, even those who left remain adamant there are valuable aspects to Steiner schools: the emphasis on community, the space for kids to be kids, the hands-on arts and crafts. And as Gray says, they hope that Te Ra – which translates to “the sun” or “the day” – will prove a prophetic name and become “that beacon of light for all the other Steiner communities to see there’s a way through this”.

Racism in Rudolf Steiner’s writings is now being given serious attention by those in Steiner education in New Zealand – and those overseeing it. This week the Ministry of Education plans to meet the Steiner federation to discuss the need for “wider debate regarding an appropriate response to racist writings/beliefs in anthroposophy”.

Work is already under way at a national level, as well as at the school. Both the school and the federation have published equity statements on their websites.

This month the federation held a national conference to explore the question of “Meeting Diversity”. Simpson points out that AUT University has developed a graduate-level paper addressing the same issue.

Like Te Ra, the national body is continuing to actively review curriculum guidelines to make sure they are contemporary, Simpson says, and “a true expression of, and responsive to, our local environment and to the increasingly diverse learning needs and socio-cultural makeup of classrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand ... We will continue to rise to the challenge of providing holistic, relevant, modern education as we have always done.”

And as the *Listener* went to press, we received an unsolicited statement from an Auckland Steiner school, Michael Park School, saying while it acknowledges Rudolf Steiner’s work, it “works out of an approach of equity, strongly rejecting any historical inferences of racial prejudice”.

In recent months, it says, the school has hosted the federation’s conference on diversity, opening it with a haka-powhiri. It held a whanau hui, prompting a record turnout of parents and students, and now plans to make that a regular event. Its annual report includes the goal of ako, a concept that emphasises the importance of culturally responsive and reciprocal practices in teaching and learning for Maori students as Maori.

The school, it says, is “continuing to be self-reflective in removing any inappropriate entrenched habits from the past so that we can continue to localise our curriculum and pedagogy such that they are an expression of the land and the people of the land in this place in time”.

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sparis Jul 25 2014, 11:59pm

"Three years ago, a similar issue arose at West Auckland's Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School, when parents of an eight-year-old girl complained she was tormented by bullies – one threatened her with an axe. After a complaint to the Human Rights Commission, the school agreed to pay the parents \$9000 and make an admission of failure."

Thank you for mentioning what we went through. For accuracy, the events took place in June 2009 and the settlement was achieved through the Office of the Director or the Human Rights Tribunal in December 2012. It was an extremely stressful and long process, and you can read all about it here: www.titirangisteinermessenger.com

You might be interested to know that Mark Thornton (since promoted to Secretary of The Federation of Rudolf Steiner Waldorf Schools in New Zealand), was the person who expelled our three young children and who signed the settlement with us.

Shockingly he then went back on everything he signed once our story went public, publishing an open letter on the school's website denying that bullying took place and re-attempting, as in so many other anecdotal accounts worldwide, to cast doubt on the child's accounts, which had admitted were honest, in order to blame the parents.

Makes you wonder what values they are modelling to children in those schools if this is the robustness of their "admission of failure".

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utunga Jul 28 2014, 2:45pm

It's not true that there cannot be change at Waldorf schools. When this article broke we were in the process of revamping our whole special character statement so as to distance ourselves from Anthroposophy in general and put an emphasis on the 100 year old tradition of teaching that is the Waldorf education. Unfortunately this article does not help at all, because it adds a lot more heat and exaggeration to an already combustible mess of rumours, innuendo and mis

quoted facts. I'm not surprised that Catherine Woulf got the date of the incidents at Titirangi Rudolf school wrong. She doesn't appear to have bothered to do very much work on this report because in fact she got a huge number of basic facts wrong - that could easily have been checked. Just for example she reports that the roll was 140 when it was 157 as of March and July roll returns (which are available from the ministry). She says that 'this is Hekia Parata country', when in fact Hekia Parata has not one a single election in this electorate. There are a number of other easily checked objective facts she just got plain wrong. This, to me, indicates that actually doing proper work and checking her sources and facts wasn't going to get in the way of her writing the story she wanted to write. She clearly interviewed many people that left the school but didn't interview *any* of the parents that stayed at the school, nor did she bother to visit the place in person or, in fact, bother to find out anything that happened at the school since last year.

She also completely mischaracterizes the report from the ministry. At the start of the article she wrote:

"

Last month an official investigation commissioned by the Ministry of Education confirmed that aspects of Steiner's writings are not compatible with the Treaty of Waitangi or New Zealand's education system. In supporting documents, the investigator also notes "more specific evidence of racism".

But the Ministry of Education statement - as reported in the dominion post - characterizes the report this way:

"

We treat any suggestion of racism in schools very seriously and always take action to investigate if a complaint is made.

We initiated an independent investigation that found no evidence of racist elements within the Te Ra Waldorf school curriculum or in the delivery of the curriculum. We are satisfied that the school is operating as it should be.

"

She also uses the word "more specific evidence of racism" in quotes but actually that phrase doesn't appear anywhere in the report.

Finally, and this is the worst thing, she repeats about four things that are essentially just 'urban myths' without qualification. Just as an example she says that a "Pakistani girl was seated next to a fair-haired, light-skinned child so she could "better evolve". But as far as I can determine from asking around last year this is just one of those things that someone heard from someone who heard it from someone who heard it from someone. At no point is there a first source who can report that they witnessed or even know someone who witnessed this occurring at any Waldorf school. This doesn't mean it's untrue but it has all the hallmarks of an urban myth (salacious, easy to repeat, believable to some depending on their prejudices). It's very much like the urban myth about Richard Gere having to visit a hospital to have a Gerbil removed from his rectum. To people who were already suspicious of the activities of gay people in big city it's exactly the kind of thing they love to repeat, but in fact it is just made up.

As I say we can't know for sure if that is true or false, but it is up to a reporter to find decent sources and confirm their facts before they report them. Putting it in quotes as "Gray, for example, was informed of a "shocking incident" at a kindergarten" is really just not good enough.

The thing is, this story is messing with real lives and a real school here, so maybe some attention to getting a fair balanced story and getting both sides, and not just repeating rumours and innuendo might have allowed us to get at the *real* issues here which are around parents not being listened to and the question of the evolution consciousness (for example) and how exactly, if at all that is affecting the curriculum at Te Ra.

And such a shame. Because there are many that had left Te Ra that really appreciated an opportunity finally air their grievances. To quote someone else:

"this article is a monument to missed opportunity for everybody. People who want serious debate about anthroposophy, about state-funding of integrated schools, about faith-based education, about whether Waldorf is faith-based education, about the racism implied, explicit, current or historic, who have a stake in a clear account of a complex community dynamic – all should be seriously disappointed. The article reads like a shabbily-written recycled press release based on dodgy journalistic practice."

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