

Religion Report

on ABC Radio National

Steiner education in Victorian state Schools

25 July 2007

Is it Occult? Steiner education in Victorian state Schools may be stretching the intent of Victoria's 1872 Education Act. The Act was the first in Australia to make education free, secular and compulsory.

[Hide Transcript](#)

Transcript

This transcript was typed from a recording of the program. The ABC cannot guarantee its complete accuracy because of the possibility of mishearing and occasional difficulty in identifying speakers.

[Jenni Lans \(parent\)](#)

[Ray Pereira \(parent\)](#)

[Jacinta Cashen \(VCSO\)](#)

[Win Warren \(Principal, Footscray City primary\)](#)

Stephen Crittenden: Welcome to the program.

'If you use a lot of abstractions with children, you will stimulate them to concentrate particularly intensively upon the formation of carbonic acid in the blood and upon the crystallisation process in the body, upon dying. If you bring children as many living pictures as possible, if you educate them by speaking in pictures, then you sow the seed for a continuous retention of oxygen, for continuous development, because you direct the children toward the future, toward life after death.' [Rudolf Steiner, *The Foundations of Human Experience: Foundations of Waldorf Education* (Anthroposophic Press, 1996) p.62]

Well that's a quote from the early 20th century Austrian humanist, educator and polymath, Rudolf Steiner, describing the foundations of the educational method he pioneered.

Steiner Schools emphasise art and music and a unique form of breathing exercise called Eurhythmly that looks a bit like liturgical dance. All in all, a warm and life-affirming educational experience.

MUSIC

Andrew Hill (teacher from Glenaeon) : This teacher tries to think very deeply about the child, to share their thoughts, to work with other teachers, and ideally, to follow a spiritual path. And that is not dictated by the school, it's very individual, but the path that Anthroposophy provides is the one that we would put forward and suggest because we find that that has all the ethical dimensions and

all the spiritual dimensions that we believe will provide the best environment for growing children.

Geraldine Doogue: Work in the arts are not unique to Steiner schools, but this dance, called Eurhythmy, is.

PIANO

Liz Wells(Eurhythmy teacher from Glenaeon): Eurhythmy brings forth into the visible what would otherwise usually be audial and would usually be internalised, so it is a medium by which the viewer is able to perceive and see visually aspects which are otherwise not visible.

Geraldine Doogue: Steiner education progresses according to how a child evolves, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. In the early years, emphasis was placed on actively developing physical and mental skills through making things, and mental arithmetic. We were unable to show children in these kindergarten rooms because younger children aren't exposed to technology such as computers and TV.

Stephen Crittenden: A grab from the 'Compass' program on ABC-TV in 2002.

The Victorian Education Department is in the middle of a growing controversy about the Steiner method. In recent years, Steiner has been adopted as an alternative curriculum strand in a number of the State's public schools. At first it happened under the radar and against Education Department policy. But last year the Department's Deputy Director, Daryl Fraser, released new guidelines approving Steiner as an optional stream in some schools.

But some parents say the Steiner method is really concealing a spiritualist philosophy, and that it's not appropriate for inclusion in a secular public system.

Steiner's educational ideas are based on the spiritualist philosophy he founded, called Anthroposophy. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines Anthroposophy as 'a system based on the premises that the human soul can, of its own power, contact the spiritual world', and says the concepts of reincarnation and karma are central to it.

The 20th century Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge is less kind. It says Anthroposophy is 'reminiscent of the decadent intellectualism of the Weimar Republic'.

Some schools, such as Footscray City Primary School in Melbourne are now deeply divided. Jenni Lans is a parent at the school who has kept her children out of the program.

Jenni Lans: We have great concerns about the inclusion of these so-called specialised curricula in government schools, mainly because they breach almost all of the basic tenets of public education, which is that they should be free, they should be secular, and they should be available to all.

Stephen Crittenden: And how is the Steiner strand at Footscray breaching those guidelines?

Jenni Lans: The most important thing of course is the secularity. There is no doubt whatsoever that Steiner is based on Anthroposophy which is a religious and spiritual whole-of-life philosophy. It's implicit throughout the entire Steiner curriculum and it is promoted relentlessly throughout the school, the precepts of Anthroposophy, which is about development of the soul and how to manage that, and it shouldn't be in an educational environment.

Stephen Crittenden: Jenny, how did you first become aware of the links between the Steiner method and Anthroposophy in the school?

Jenni Lans: Well it was in the first year, from the school newsletter. There was a long article about Harry Potter, which was basically saying that Harry Potter was not suitable to read because its myths and legends were not up to scratch. And I thought it was odd that it should be in a primary school in Victoria, this diatribe against reading Harry Potter. I thought it was so strange. So once I'd done a bit of research on the authors of this article, I realised that they were senior members of the Anthroposophical Society and they were Anthroposophists, and that was the first time I drew the link between Steiner and Anthroposophy. And then from then on, I started doing some research. And that was four years ago now.

Stephen Crittenden: Right. And what was the negative attitude to Harry Potter about?

Jenni Lans: Well they seemed to think that the myths that she uses are not legitimate. For instance, there's a strong Christian analogy in Harry Potter but more to do with the spells and the magic. And the gnomes and the fairies didn't sort of come up to scratch with Anthroposophists' idea of gnomes and fairies because they truly believe that gnomes are actually real, only people with advanced souls can see the gnomes, so they had a bit of a problem with the gnomes in Harry Potter who have personalities and aren't terribly nice. From my reading of Harry Potter.

Stephen Crittenden: Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that when you ask the Steiner people, Is Anthroposophy a religion? They reply, No, it's a philosophy. Is there any evidence that you've seen at Footscray, of a kind of religious element or an occult element or a spiritualist element coming out in the classroom.

Jenni Lans: Most definitely. In The Vine, which is the little school newsletter, it's flooded with Anthroposophical material of study groups, along the lines of: 'The Fifth Gospel, a study on the Fifth Gospel. Rudolf Steiner's research into the influence of the stars and the evolution of humanity. Angels and nature spirit realms. Our relationship to spiritual beings.' Now if that's not religious and spiritual, I'd like to know what is. And the entire Anthroposophical curriculum, not that we've ever been provided with one, but we know from the teacher diploma, that it's heavily religious, and spiritual.

Stephen Crittenden: Have parents at Footscray asked for a curriculum, a Steiner curriculum?

Jenni Lans: Yes, we have. It's never been given to us.

Stephen Crittenden: Was the Steiner system, Steiner's theories of education, explained to parents when it was introduced into Footscray School?

Jenni Lans: It's been done on a very shallow kind of level. It's all about the development of the child and the whole child, and playing and all that kind of stuff. And what they don't do, the critical point is they've never said it's based on Anthroposophy, which is Rudolf Steiner's own little mish-mash of spiritual ideas from the 19th century. The entire educational method is based on that, and it includes spiritual things such as angels and fairies and gnomes and the development of the soul, and reincarnation, the entire philosophy is about the development of the soul and how to get that to happen within education. Now that has never ever, ever, been explained at all to anybody in the school environment ever. And it's encroaching on all the mainstream students as well, because there's a constant idea that we should all get together but we don't want to get together until a) the Department of Education, Darryl Fraser, the Secretary of that Department, and John Lenders the Minister, do an actual proper research into the so-called educational method, and assure us what the benefits are, and assure us that there are no religious practices being taught because we don't believe that.

Stephen Crittenden: The Victorian Education Department places choice for parents right at the pinnacle of its list of virtues; don't parents have a choice here? Can't they pull their kids out of the Steiner stream if they're not happy, or keep their kids out of the Steiner stream, keep them in the mainstream. I mean is that a problem?

Jenni Lans: They can stay in the Steiner stream or the mainstream as much as they like. I guess the issue is surely the idea of choice should not be more important than the Education Act in protecting those three things. Surely they already have a choice; they already have a whole series of independent Steiner schools in Victoria and across the nation; why can't they go to those? Why do they have to come into government schools?

Stephen Crittenden: Thank you very much for being on the program.

Jenni Lans: Thank you.

Stephen Crittenden: Footscray City Primary School parent, Jenni Lans.

'The transition from the fifth cultural epoch to the sixth cultural epoch cannot happen differently than as a violent fight between white mankind and coloured mankind in the most varied areas. [Rudolf Steiner, *Die Geistigen Hintergruende des Ersten Weltkrieges* (The Spiritual Background of the First World War), (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1974), p.38]

'If blonde and blue-eyed people die out, the human race will become increasingly dense ... Blond hair actually bestows intelligence. In the case of fair people, less nourishment is driven into the eyes and hair; it remains instead in the brain and endows it with intelligence.' [Rudolf Steiner, *Health and Illness*, Vol.1 (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1981), pp.85-86]

Rudolf Steiner again.

Well let's hear now from another parent at the Footscray City Primary School. Ray Pereira is a musician who initially was attracted to the Steiner program because of the art and music. He's not only taken his children out of the program, but out of the school.

Ray Pereira: Well I stumbled across Steiner really because initially I was looking for a school for my child who was five years old. One of them was Footscray City Primary, and the Principal of the school told me that they had a Steiner stream in the school, and that I might want to consider it. I hadn't really heard a lot about Steiner, of course I had heard of it, but I didn't know much about it. So I thought OK, well look, let's look at it as an alternative; I was a musician and I was open to ideas of alternative education etc., I didn't have any particular strong views either way.

Stephen Crittenden: But the music and the art side of things attracted you?

Ray Pereira: The music and the art side attracted me as well as activities in the school like in the prep. My child is five so it was more relevant to looking at the prep room the way the prep room was done up, and it was in nice colours, you know, pastel colours. So we thought we'd give it a go.

Stephen Crittenden: And what happened?

Ray Pereira: Well initially it was going along reasonably happily, although I must say right from the start I felt a little bit of unease about it; I couldn't quite put my finger on it. There were lots of little incidents if you like, or events that were happening in the classroom and around the Steiner stream. For example -

Stephen Crittenden: Go on, what kind of things?

Ray Pereira: Well the day started off with what they call a blessing. Now this sounded suspiciously like a prayer to me, but because it was called a blessing and didn't involve any particular religious references, I kind of went along with it. So for example they'd start the morning off with a blessing, and they'd bless the trees and the animals and people who came into the room etc. etc., and this was all fine. Except that the prayer finished with a reference to God about, and peace to all mankind. Well initially I thought Oh well, I'll let that go. But then I kind of started thinking about it and I thought Look, there's a reference here to God, which I'm really not that happy about, because they're discussing it as God is being a given, as opposed to discussing whether there is a God or some people believe there is a God or not. And I come from a background which is both I guess religious as well as you could say atheist. And certainly my wife doesn't believe in God.

Stephen Crittenden: Now your background is Sri Lankan, am I right?

Ray Pereira: My background is Sri Lankan, yes.

Stephen Crittenden: I understand that your kids have had odd experiences in relation to colour.

Ray Pereira: Well I wouldn't say that they were discriminated against openly or overtly, but for example, the class wasn't allowed to use black or brown colours, it was only yellows and reds and certain colours that were allowed to be used. Now this was a little bit of a problem I guess for my kids because they see themselves as being brown, and therefore weren't allowed to colour themselves as brown, you know.

Stephen Crittenden: Did you or your wife ever raise that with the teachers at the school?

Ray Pereira: The reason we were given was 'It's not a pure colour' and therefore they wanted kids to experience what they call 'pure colours', for whatever reason.

Stephen Crittenden: The pure colours are the light colours?

Ray Pereira: Yes, they are. But there were several issues. One that particular affected me was the question of reincarnation. Now as you mentioned, I'm from Sri Lanka and I grew up in a fairly multicultural society with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, and a lot of my friends were from these particular religions, and I've never really had any problem with that. And I've had experience of, say, Buddhist and reincarnation etc.

Stephen Crittenden: And of course Rudolf Steiner believed in reincarnation.

Ray Pereira: That's right. Now what happened was we had a parent-teacher interview with my youngest son who was in the prep class, and he was five years old at the time, and the teacher told us that she thought it would be better for him to spend another year in prep and not move on to Class 1, because she didn't feel he was ready for it. And as evidence of this, she pulled out a drawing of his, and said, 'Look at this', and his drawing is depicting whatever the drawing was, a view from above the earth; he's looking down on the earth which indicates that 'his soul is not fully incarnated yet, and it's hovering over the earth'.

Stephen Crittenden: So you were being told that your son was only partially incarnated?

Ray Pereira: Was only partially incarnated and his soul was 'hovering over the earth'. These were the words she used. I don't care what people believe, but I would expect if I'm in a State school that decisions based on my child's education and future are based on concrete evidence not on something like that, which I found rather alarming really.

Stephen Crittenden: Do you believe, Ray, that it's a religion?

Ray Pereira: Look this touches on what I consider to be one of the problems of the movement in the State school. I felt that I was being conned, and that there was something going on, there's a subtext or something underlying the whole thing that I wasn't being told about. So for example, I would be told, or I was told that Look, you know, it's not religious, it's secular, Anthroposophy is not taught, it's not religious, etc. etc. But my everyday experience is that everything that is taught in the school is based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and therefore Anthroposophy. Now whether it's a religion

or not, to me is a moot point. Because I grew up as I said before, with Buddhists. Some people would call Buddhism a religion; others call it a philosophy. So the point I'm trying to make is, and I don't really care whether you call it a religion or not, but certainly some religious aspects were introduced to our children, whether overtly or covertly, and that was really a problem, because I was told by the Principal of the school that it wasn't religious.

Stephen Crittenden: So you've taken your kids out of that strand, have you?

Ray Pereira: I certainly have taken my kids out of the school as well..

Stephen Crittenden: Out of the school as well?

Ray Pereira: Because the current Principal had adopted a position that the Steiner School is there to stay, and that if it was there to stay, there was going to be I guess a bit of cross-fertilisation between the two streams.

Stephen Crittenden: And what did that mean? What did cross-fertilisation between the two strands mean?

Ray Pereira: In order, as the Principal put it, for harmony in the school to be developed, certain programs would be done together. Now on my reading of Anthroposophy as well as my experiences, I wasn't really happy for my children were in the mainstream section of the school, to have any programs that were in common. I don't care what people want to teach their children, if it's in a private school or whatever, but I objected to this, I felt not being told the truth as to what's underlying Steiner education.

Stephen Crittenden: Footscray parent Ray Pereira.

Here's Rudolf Steiner again, speaking to Steiner teachers about school prayer.

I ask only one thing of you. You see in such things everything depends upon the external appearances. Never call a verse a prayer, call it an opening verse before school. Avoid allowing anyone to hear you as a faculty member, using the word 'prayer'. [Rudolf Steiner, Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1998), p.20]

Jacinta Cashen is President of the Victorian Council of School Organisations, a body that lobbies on behalf of secular education.

Jacinta Cashen: I guess the main problem is that our organisation, it's 85 years old or thereabouts, and has always advocated for universal, free, secular public education, and for us from what we understand of Steiner, have done some investigating ourselves, and what we are quite clear about is, it's clearly based on Christian principles and other things that are enough for us to say This is not secular education.

Stephen Crittenden: And what if the response to that is, Well that's a matter of choice; parents who want it can opt in, and parents who don't want it, are free to send their kids to the mainstream strand of the public school that they're going to.

Jacinta Cashen: Well firstly I guess, as an organisation, we would be saying there is choice more generally in the community, there is an education system that has a Catholic school system as part of it, and an independent part to it as well, including some Steiner schools that are independent Steiner schools. So there is choice. We would argue that public education is meant to be secular, free and universal, and therefore having the Steiner stream compromises all that; it also compromises the free part, because the Steiner parents pay additional fees for being part of the Steiner stream in a mainstream school. And also for (and this is the kind of conversation we're having with some of the parents at some of these schools) is that the parents who have chosen the secular, universal, free, public education, are feeling that some of the values in the Steiner program are actually impinging on what they signed up for, in effect.

Stephen Crittenden: But you're also speaking to some parents who put their kids into the Steiner stream and then were unhappy and took them out. What are they telling you?

Jacinta Cashen: Well what they're telling us, which is quite interesting, they trusted the public education system, so they thought whatever the public education system was saying they were providing would be backed up with government guidelines and regulations, and so forth. So they figured OK, this Steiner program sounds initially like it's very much focused on the child, very much focused on the arts, and most parents that I speak to are interested in the arts and those things, so they thought, All right, this sounds like a good program to be part of; we'll enrol in this program. And then after a period of time being in the program, they found that it was more than what it first appeared to be.

Stephen Crittenden: Well what specific examples are they telling you about, and can you give us, that actually demonstrate that some kind of religious or occult or spiritualist dimension is coming out in the classroom?

Jacinta Cashen: Well clearly, there's quite a bit of ritual that involves bell ringing and lighting of candles, and chanting or reading out verses, that for me, having had a Catholic education, clearly sound like prayer. Also songs that are to do with particular Christian traditions and a focus on the Christian traditions, also one parent we were talking to, her children are dark-skinned and she realised that they couldn't represent themselves in drawing, and in fact they were being directed to draw in particular ways and particular techniques, so she found that that was going to be impossible for her children not to be able to represent themselves in drawing, because often children especially in the early years of schooling, are often drawing, and drawing themselves and their families. So that can be quite -

Stephen Crittenden: I'm told under the Steiner method there's a kind of horror of dark colours.

Jacinta Cashen: Yes, there seems to be something about you're not allowed to outline your drawings, they've got to be somehow this kind of fluid shapes almost, or images that don't really have an end to them. Almost -

Stephen Crittenden: And is there any evidence that there's a spiritual basis for that?

Jacinta Cashen: Well certainly it seems to me the kind of thing I now understand about Steiner is he said he was some kind of clairvoyant who spoke to the spirit world, and there is a lot of talk about spirits and ghosts and those kinds of figures, so it does make you wonder whether or not this is meant to sort of represent that imagery.

Stephen Crittenden: I understand from reading about Steiner that his own theories were heavily race-based. Is there any evidence that that is coming through in the current expression of Steiner in Victorian schools?

Jacinta Cashen: It seems to be depending on the school. This is a question we asked the Department of Education too: what is Steiner? So some schools seem to have what I might call Steiner Lite, where that doesn't necessarily seem to be so evident.

Stephen Crittenden: Steiner Lite, you're saying?

Jacinta Cashen: Yes. It seems to me there's this layer of Steiner that seems on the surface to be quite fine; it is about the arts, a particular way of doing the arts, by the way, that's fairly orthodox, or fairly specific, and a focus on the child. But then when you start to sort of get underneath all of that, there seems to be this other world, and in fact parents have complained to us that in fact you're not allowed in a Steiner classroom to really watch what's going on, which also concerns some people.

Stephen Crittenden: The President of the Victorian Council of School Organisations, Jacinta Cashen.

Well we asked the Victorian Education Minister and the Deputy Secretary of the Department, Darryl Fraser to speak to The Religion Report today, but they both declined. However, the Principal of Footscray City Primary School, Win Warren, did agree to speak to us, and I asked whether she was running a divided school.

Win Warren: I certainly wouldn't describe it in that way at all. We have really united staff in this school. We work really well across the staff in all parts of our school which is quite a complex school. Certainly not the children; they're fine, they all play together in the playground. However out of our - we probably have 296 families, 385 children here, and I would say we have perhaps somewhere around 20 or maybe a few more, parents who are not happy about us having a Steiner stream.

Stephen Crittenden: How many kids in the Steiner stream are there, what proportion?

Win Warren: 172, which I think at the minute is around 45%.

Stephen Crittenden: And how do you manage the two streams?

Win Warren: The two streams of children are all enrolled at Footscray City Primary School, first and foremost. The parents make a decision prior to enrolling their children, whether they wish them to do the regular State School program, or whether they would like them to do a Steiner program. If they would like them to do a Steiner program, we spend quite a lot of time talking to the parents about what that involves.

Stephen Crittenden: How much are the parents told about Rudolf Steiner's ideas and his system and the Anthroposophical base of it all?

Win Warren: They are given packs of Information so that they can learn about it. The Steiner teachers meet with the parents as well so that they're able to talk about what it is that happens in the classrooms, and the program and the classrooms, because we are a State school, it follows the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, that's the curriculum that's taught in Victorian State Schools. And Steiner teachers along with all the teachers here, are State Schoolteachers. They are employed under the same conditions and the same processes as all other teachers are.

Stephen Crittenden: And how have they been trained in the Steiner method?

Win Warren: They usually have a four-year training degree, as everybody is required to, and in most cases they've done an additional two years training as Steiner teachers.

Stephen Crittenden: What are the parents told about Anthroposophy? Are they told about its spiritualist base?

Win Warren: Where Anthroposophy fits into it is that that is part of the teacher training. So the teachers study that as part of the training that they undertake. It is absolutely not part of the classroom program in any way whatsoever, and parents would be told that.

Stephen Crittenden: A lot of parents are telling us about a strong spiritualist or occult dimension coming out in the classrooms however.

Win Warren: I don't believe that's true, that the teachers are required to teach the V.E.L.S; Victorian Essential Learning Standards. They have to meet the State-wide guidelines the same as all the other -

Stephen Crittenden: Well indeed if there was a religious dimension coming out in the classroom, would that actually be against the State Education Department guidelines?

Win Warren: They don't teach religious instruction and they're not qualified to teach religious instruction, and that's not part of the program that they give.

Stephen Crittenden: I don't think anyone's suggesting anyone's being taught religion directly, it's a

question of whether the religious principles that underpin the whole of Steiner's educational philosophy are really unavoidably there intrinsically bound up with what's going on in the general Steiner curriculum.

Win Warren: I think it's bound up in the teacher training, rather than in what the teachers teach in the classroom. I think that's the important difference.

Stephen Crittenden: Is this whole thing, do you think, a bigger issue Win, than you can deal with at the local level? You know, it's a very interesting thing. I read a recent report on how Steiner's bedding down at the Castlemaine school, and the report raises the question, and it makes the point, that parents are raising the question of whether or not Steiner is a religious philosophy at base, and whether it's appropriate for it to be in a secular school, and it says basically that's a matter for Head Office. Head Office has made the decision that Steiner is in, and so it's not really an issue to be debated at local level. What do you think of that?

Win Warren: I think that it is an issue that the Department has dealt with, and they have agreed that our school is approved to have this program, as part of what we're doing here, and that's fine by me, basically, that the Department approves of it and we're implementing it according to the Department guidelines.

Stephen Crittenden: Are you an Anthroposophist yourself?

Win Warren: Oh heavens, no. I'm a State School person through and through and trained State School Primary School Principal, and I came into the school with no background whatsoever in Steiner education.

Stephen Crittenden: In fact I understand that you were the one who insisted that there had to be a policy at the level of the State Education Department because when you came in there wasn't one.

Win Warren: I think that's quite reasonable, yes, and I think the Department realised that that was necessary, yes.

Stephen Crittenden: Great to have you on the program. Thank you very much.

Win Warren: Thank you for that.

Stephen Crittenden: The Principal of Footscray City Primary School, Win Warren. And I should also say that we approached the Executive Officer of the Steiner Schools of Australia but were refused an interview.

Thanks this week to producers Leila Schunner and Noel Debien for a truly Herculean effort this week. Well that's all for me, Stephen Crittenden.

Guests

Jenni Lans

Parent from Footscray City Primary school

Ray Pereira

Former parent from Footscray City Primary school

Jacinta Cashen

President of the Victorian Council of School Organisations

Win Warren

Principal of Footscray City Primary school

Further Information

[People for State Education](#)

[Footscray City Primary School](#)

[Victorian Council of School Organisations](#)

[Rudolf Steiner on wiki](#)

[Anthroposophy](#)

[Critics of the Waldorf movement](#)

[Rudolf Steiner Schools Association of Australia](#)

[Rudolf Steiner Web \(portal\)](#)

[Waldorf Schools and their critics](#)

[Is anthroposophy a religion? \(Waldorf answers\)](#)

[Melbourne Rudolf Steiner school](#)

[Rudolf Steiner's principles of education](#)

Presenter

Stephen Crittenden

Producer

Noel Debien



Wednesday 8.30am
repeated **8pm**
Presented by
Stephen Crittenden

 Religion Report | Radio National | Programs A-Z