

# THE 7.30 REPORT

## Steiner education goes mainstream

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**An attempt to broaden the appeal of state education appears to be coming unstuck in Victoria where an investigation was launched this week into a public school offering the Steiner method of teaching. The review is being undertaken after a significant number of students failed to meet literacy and numeracy standards. This investigation follows one into the Steiner stream at another primary school where parents complained that the spirituality of the Steiner system was incompatible with secular public education. 7.30's Mary Gearin investigates.**

### Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: An attempt in Victoria to broaden the appeal of public education by opening up a number of primary schools to the Steiner method of teaching as an alternative stream, has become somewhat problematic, with the system under review in two of the primary schools.

One investigation relates to literacy and numeracy standards, and the other comes after some parents complained that the spirituality implicit in the Steiner system was incompatible with secular public education.

Mary Gearin reports from Melbourne.

CHARLES LIVINGSTONE, PARENT: I think they're both quite confident children and I think certainly part of that would be attributable to the Steiner influence.

MARY GEARIN: Both of Charles Livingstone's children, Karla and Jack, have attended a Steiner stream in this public school, Footscray City Primary.

Theirs and many other's experiences have been happy, a far cry from Ray Pereira's. He's withdrawn both his boys from the stream and the school, citing a range of concerns that culminated with a teacher's assessment of his younger son.

RAY PEREIRA, PARENT: She thought his soul wasn't fully incarnated yet, which was strange thing for me to hear at a parent-teacher interview. And then she pulled out some drawings that he'd done which showed him, I guess, looking down, like a planned view of what he was drawing and she used this as evidence that his soul was hovering over the earth and looking down on the earth and so, therefore, she felt that he wasn't quite ready to move into the following year.

MARY GEARIN: These are the polarised views behind the conflict besieging the school. It's bearing the brunt of a wider debate about the place of spirituality in public schools, indeed the very nature of public education.

'FLEUR', PARENT: It's made me sad that the division has been created by, I believe, a few people who are

unhappy.

JENNI LANS, PARENT: Well, the problem is that in relation to the Education Act they breach the three vital clauses which are free, secular and universal.

ROSEMARY GENTLE, RUDOLF STEINER SCHOOLS OF AUSTRALIA: They want their children to be educated in a very stable and a very supportive learning environment where they are allowed to be children and they are allowed to learn in line with their natural development.

MARY GEARIN: This is a Steiner stream class in Briar Hill Primary School. A well-integrated program by all accounts for three years. To understand the Steiner education philosophy it's worth considering the man who inspired it all - Austrian philosopher, artist, playwright and prolific social thinker Rudolf Steiner. In the early years of last century he founded the movement of Anthroposophy. He called it a spiritual science.

ROSEMARY GENTLE: Steiner education has been in Australia for 50 years and it has served the Australian educational landscape very, very well.

MARY GEARIN: Seven thousand student are now currently in private Steiner schools, but now eight Victorian public schools have Steiner streams, encouraged by the State's policy that lets schools have a large say in their own curriculums.

The stream at Footscray City has been in place since 2001, but Jenni Lans, the mother of a child in the mainstream, is in a fiercely critical minority.

JENNI LANS: Well, we're hearing stories of parents coming home, their children have brought home pictures of the devil. We have stories of parents coming home listening to their child talking about how they have been reincarnated and how they have chosen their parents. We've heard stories of parents saying their child has come home and said, "You're not the boss of me, God's the boss of me".

MARY GEARIN: Jenni Lans says Anthroposophy is promoted through the school newsletter and while she doesn't call it religion she says it teaches religious and spiritual practices.

JENNI LANS: Public schools are supposed to be secular. That's an absolutely vital cornerstone of public education and you can't fiddle with it.

CHARLES LIVINGSTONE: I accept that there is an element of spirituality to Steiner's underlying philosophy and his underlying pedagogy. But that is a spirituality which is focused on understanding the relation between people in the world that they live in rather than pushing any particular religious barrow. It certainly doesn't push any doctrine.

RAY PEREIRA: I would like the Education Department to tell me where, in the guidelines, where reincarnation is a criteria for putting my kid up into another class or not.

JOHN ALLMAN, VICTORIA EDUCATION DEPARTMENT: Well, it's more of a common understanding about what secularism means within a Government school system rather than a distinct definition.

MARY GEARIN: John Allman says the current independent review into Footscray City Primary will ensure the school keeps to guidelines for specialist curriculum approaches that were updated last year. They include a requirement to obey the Act that requires secular education, but doesn't supply a definition.

JOHN ALLMAN: We have people available within the Department to guide that process at the local level, but you're right in terms of the Act, whether it be the 1870s Act or the Act of 2006, the actual definition of secularism is broad.

MARY GEARIN: One of the more controversial Steiner practices is saying morning and afternoon verses.

ROSEMARY GENTLE: Some verses may mention God; a lot of them won't mention God. There is no interpretation of God.

DAVID MILLIKAN, UNITING CHURCH MINISTER: If you're making some sort of ritualistic address to God, then it's very difficult to say that it's not a prayer.

MARY GEARIN: Dr David Millikan brings several perspectives to this. He's a Uniting Church Minister, a recognised authority on cults and had a daughter attend what he calls a quite secularised private Steiner school. But he says there's no place for Steiner in the public sphere.

DAVID MILLIKAN: I don't really accept that there is a clear division between Steiner's educational teachings and his underlying philosophical religious systems.

ROSEMARY GENTLE: It's simply a way of developing a greater consciousness if you like, but none of that comes into any classroom.

MARY GEARIN: One of Steiner's more notable features is that the first years of education are based on creative play and artistic activities, with formal reading and writing left until later. More specifically, until adult teeth are evident according to many Steiner advocates.

Rosemary Gentle says a delayed reading age is in line with many other countries.

ROSEMARY GENTLE: One thing is to distinguish between formal reading and writing, and literacy and numeracy. We do a great deal of work with literacy and numeracy in the early years.

DAVID MILLIKAN: There are sometimes children whose teeth haven't developed as quickly as others who won't be taught to read until they're eight or nine years old, which is a very risky side of business.

MARY GEARIN: Before the Footscray City stream began, one education department report said Steiner education would appear to be the antithesis of the philosophy of the State's early year's programs in terms of literacy, and that Steiner education is based on a philosophy of cocooning children from the world to develop their imagination and learn to conjure up ideas, which it said was contrary to the curriculum policy of the time.

JOHN ALLMAN: I am aware there was an issue at that time, but there was further discussion beyond that, and a decision was made to allow the stream to be introduced at Footscray City.

MARY GEARIN: As the debate continues, it's perhaps reassuring that the attitude of at least one Steiner student is nothing out of the ordinary.

KARLA LIVINGSTONE-PARDY, STEINER STUDENT: It's just good, it's just school, really.

KERRY O'BRIEN: That report from Mary Gearin.

