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## 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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