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Parents spend on Steiner dropouts

Milanda Rout | August 20, 2007

PARENTS whose eight-year-old children went to a Steiner school have been forced to spend thousands of dollars on private tutors to teach them to read and write.

One child's literacy skills were so poor he was diagnosed with dyslexia and told he would never be able to attend a mainstream school without a teacher's aide.

The Rudolf Steiner curriculum is based on the belief that children should not formally learn to read and write until their adult teeth come through at about seven.

The alternative education movement operates at more than 44 schools across the nation, but concerns have been raised about its spiritual basis since it started moving into Victorian government schools. "None of my children could read or write when they left at age seven or eight," said Rachel Piercy, who took her children out of Manning River Steiner School in Taree, NSW.

"We had to do a lot of extra work for my son because he was in Year 2 and still couldn't read. Now he is in Year 4 and he has finally caught up."

Ms Piercy said she spent more than \$1000 on private tutors to get her son and daughter up to scratch. The former school board director said Steiner's early learning was based on spiritual beliefs rather than educational principles.

Many parents were attracted to the creative side of Steiner, but had no idea what they were getting into.

"I remember being seduced by the beauty of it and feeling like a fool afterwards," she said.

Another parent who also pulled her two children out of the Manning River school, but who did not want to be named, said her eight-year-old boy was diagnosed with dyslexia soon after he left the school.

"My son could not read at age eight and we spent thousands of dollars in getting help for him," she said.

"It took an intense 18 months of catch-up work and he has vastly improved and now he meets the average in his class. He is also so much happier now."

But Manning River Steiner School board chairman Kevin Watt said parents knew the Steiner approach to early learning was different when they enrolled their children in the school.

"The process we use is very unique. We don't chase it (reading and writing) down in kindergarten and prep," he said.

Mr Watt said formal reading and writing was not introduced until Year 1 -- when children were six or seven -- because Steiner learning followed the natural development of the child.

"The single thing most kids under seven want to do is play," he said.

Mr Watt said Steiner students did not perform up to the state average in Year 3 literacy and numeracy tests.

"Because we don't push it in the early years, they are obviously not up to the levels of state school students," he said.

"But when our students do the assessment in Grade 5, they are 20 per cent above the average."

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