

The delusional world of Rudolf Steiner

Ian Hayward Robinson

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A religiously-inspired education practice insinuating itself into the Victorian state education system?

'Impossible!' you say. But it's happening right under our noses.

In a number of Victorian primary schools, cliques of parents have conspired to create so-called 'Steiner education annexes' subsidised by taxpayers' money, under the same roof as our normal 3Rs classrooms.

How can this be? We don't have Jesuit annexes or Madrasah annexes.

These religious incursions into our allegedly free, secular and universal education system have been permitted due to the cowardice of the Victorian Education Department, which is arguably not only the most vapid and limp section of the state bureaucracy but also the most rudderless and wasteful of taxes. Plainly there are no adequate checks and balances on its operations and spending.

A succession of Liberal and Labor ministers tried unsuccessfully to rationalise the education bureaucracy and bring it under control, but in the end they found the task beyond them and have been content to simply pump more money into the bottomless pit of education budget over-runs. Their vain hope was to plaster over any potential cracks.

In this kind of corporate atmosphere, officials follow the path of least resistance and acquiesce too readily to strident demands by community groups, rather than subject them to adequate scrutiny and risk public controversy by rejecting them if this seems appropriate. They would rather abandon the educational welfare of students than stand up to a campaign by determined propagandists.

So the system is extremely vulnerable to the kind of intrusion represented by Steiner annexes. Surprisingly, similar distortions of

the principles of public education to Steiner have not yet occurred.

The Steiner beachhead has succeeded due to the partisan lobbying by groups of acolytes who seek to provide a spiritually-based education for their children at the secular system's expense. Most of them seem to know little about Rudolf Steiner or his crazy theories on just about everything, but are sucked in by the superficially attractive rhetoric and egged on by the hard-core disciples of this weird early twentieth century German guru.

Part of the propaganda is that Steiner education is not 'religious' or 'spiritual'. It may be true that religion or spirituality are not overtly proselytised in Steiner annexes, although we can't be sure of this because there is little monitoring or evaluation. The whole basis of Steiner education, however, comes from Steiner's excursions into what he called 'spiritual' or 'occult science', which was code for him going into a meditative state, free-associating around a topic, and writing down the results of his ruminations as though they were incontrovertible truth. Using this method he came up with a number of amazing break-throughs in modern thought, such as the importance of burying stag bladders full of yarrow flowers in a field to stimulate the growth of crops!

The principles of Steiner education are certainly not evidence-based or the result of rigorous research. A perusal of the comprehensive world-wide educational data base, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), reveals only a handful of articles about Steiner, most of them anecdotal. One or two actual studies claim Steiner school students are 'more creative' or 'more imaginative' than students in mainstream schools, which is not surprising seeing the centrality of Steiner's idiosyncratic theories of art in his education system.

One would have thought that Steiner propagandists would have been keen to establish the credentials of their system by a series of well-designed and executed research studies, but this is not the case. There is virtually no hard information about what goes on in Steiner classrooms or on the effects of it on children's learning.

In eschewing such empirical studies, Steiner's supporters are really only following the guru himself. Steiner was highly dismissive of the 'trend of human evolution ... to validate judgements through visual observations' and believed a better guide to life was the 'reality of the human being's inner activity', by which, of course, he meant *his* 'inner activity', which he believed came from a universal source that he had tapped into.

If the sources of Steiner's educational ideas are not educational research, where do they come from? Although this is often denied, there is no doubt they come from Steiner's quasi-religious beliefs.

Steiner teachers don't say overtly that their system is religious, because then they wouldn't be allowed to teach it in state public schools and maybe wouldn't get as many takers for their dedicated schools. But the whole system is shot through with religion, whether the teachers admit it or even know it.

When the children study Indian mythology one year and Hebrew another and so on, they are not studying 'comparative religion', as one parent claimed, they are recapitulating the spiritual development of man as Steiner believed it occurred, from the mythical civilisations of 'Lemuria' and 'Atlantis', through the Egyptian, Indian, and Hebrew civilisations to its culmination in modern (i.e. early 20th century) 'Aryan' (i.e. German) civilisation. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers divide the development of the child into seven year cycles, this obeisance to the mystical number 'seven' is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers prefer white and blue to black and brown, this comes from his belief in an eternal battle for men's souls between good white 'angels' and the evil dark spirit Ahriman, who was and is trying to stop man's spiritual development. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers focus on different aspects of the person at different stages, this is based on his religious belief about humans having three bodies (the physical, the 'astral' and the 'etheric') that develop in a certain order at certain times. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

When Steiner teachers make children at a certain age paint on damp paper, which makes everything go fuzzy, this is because he believed their souls were not yet developed enough to cope with sharp distinctions. This is not an educational idea, it is a religious one.

One could go on. Steiner education may not look 'religious' on the surface, but it is in fact a bundle of religious ideas dressed up as educational ones. This is what is insidious about it and this is why it has no place in the secular public system.

Steiner certainly thought his education system was an extension of his religious beliefs. He tells the teachers in his first school that 'by employing our methods we will harmonise the higher human being (the human spirit and soul) with the physical body (our lower [sic] being)'. Five years later he tells them: 'Every word and gesture in my teaching as a whole will be permeated with religious fervour' and talks about having 'educated children very naturally in a priestly way — what is really a religious devotion ...'.

This position has not changed since Steiner's death. A Steiner education website states: 'Anthroposophy holds that the human being is fundamentally a spiritual being and that all human beings deserve respect as the embodiment of their spiritual nature. This view is carried into Waldorf [Steiner] education ...' and another states: 'Rudolf Steiner's educational philosophy must be set within the context of his main endeavour - to address the latent possibilities in human beings of advancing beyond the present-day accepted limits of cognition to an awakening, by self-discipline and exercise, to a knowledge of the spiritual worlds underlying outer existence — higher worlds.'

It is no accident that the only extended discussions of Steiner education in the Australian broadcast media have been on the ABC's **religious** programs, *Compass* and *The Religion Report*.

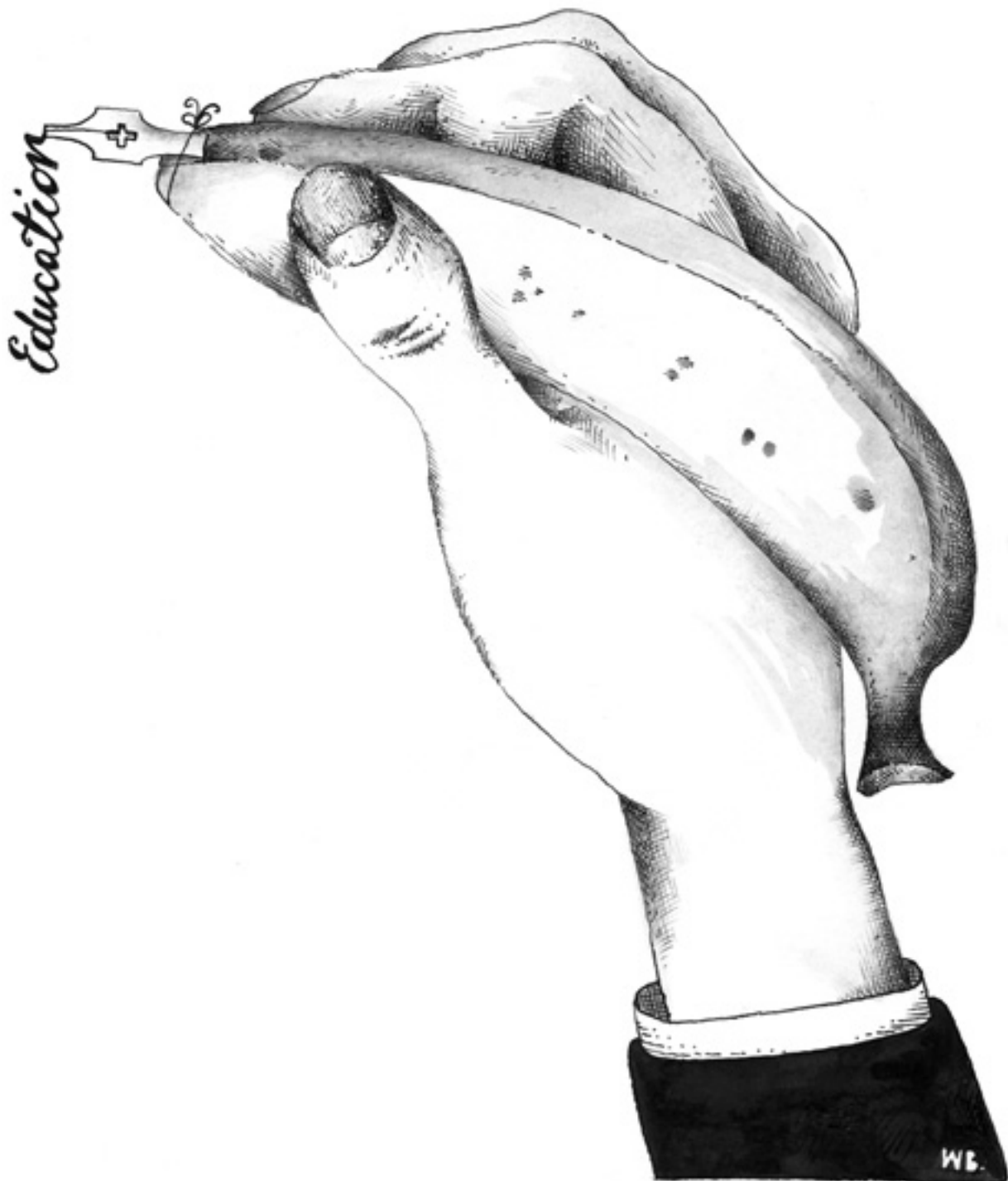
Perhaps this spiritual bias doesn't matter if the educational benefits of the Steiner ideology are great enough to outweigh its dependence on a religious core. Steiner education is clearly not all bad, or it would not have gained the support it has. Steiner himself was not a dangerous guru in the mould of Jim Jones or David Koresh, although he did share with them one of the pivotal characteristics of gurus, an absolute and totally sincere belief in the truth of his delusional ideas — a strength of conviction that was a key to his ability to attract numerous followers. He was generally acknowledged to be a sensitive, kind, generous and

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very intelligent man but his basic ideas about the world are so obviously fanciful and delusional that to read them with any sort of critical intelligence is to dismiss them in dismay.

If some of his ideas on education have worthwhile lessons for us — making the arts more central, dealing with the whole person, being concerned with initiation into the culture and not just training in skills — these good things are vitiated by the stubbornness with which Steiner schools and teachers try to shoehorn children into the pattern pre-

determined for them by Steiner's cogitations. While its propaganda claims a central concern for individual differences, in fact what Steiner education does is to try to slot all children into the developmental pigeon-hole designed for them by Rudolf Steiner, within which there is only a small amount of room to move. Human destiny is seen as moving along pre-ordained paths and the Steiner teacher's role is to keep children on the fairly straight and relatively narrow as defined by Steiner. Life is not for self-fulfillment, but for fulfilling your Steiner-defined



spiritual destiny. There are unfortunate hints of German fascism in this.

There is much anecdotal evidence suggesting there are inadequacies in Steiner education in the key areas of reading and mathematics, but the situation is obscured because schools with Steiner annexes don't provide test results for the discrete parts of the school but lump the Steiner and mainstream results together.

Apart from the academic doubts, there are other concerns about having Steiner annexes as part of public schools. They effectively create two schools with different philosophies and approaches under one administrative framework, which places a huge burden on the already overworked school administrators and takes time and attention away from other more important educational tasks. Furthermore they often lead to the creation of a two-tiered system of opportunity for students. For example, at Footscray City Primary School, the Steiner students get taught instrumental music, while the mainstream students don't.

Typically, more and more resources get diverted from the mainstream into the Steiner annex. In some cases, School Councils are being taken over by Steiner parents so that reasonable requests from mainstream parents for things such as competitive sport and awards recognising student achievement are simply voted down. Because there is no cap on the percentage of students that can be included in such 'annexes' there is a danger that they may drive other parents away and eventually take over the whole school. This has already occurred at Melbourne's Collingwood Education Centre — there are no ordinary state school primary students in that school anymore — and there are reasons to suspect that elsewhere in Melbourne, Bentleigh East PS is going down the same road.

Because the Steiner parents form an organised and focused lobbying group, and often try to gain the collaboration of the school principal, there is an encroachment of Steiner's anthroposophical ideas and methods into the mainstream state school system.

Again in Melbourne at Footscray City PS, all children are being taught art by a Steiner teacher, and they work in class on and participate in what are effectively Steiner-inspired festivals under another guise.

Steiner concepts such as that competition is bad, that sport should be discouraged, and that play should be 'gentle' become imposed on the whole school. This means for example that at Footscray City PS the whole school no longer has things like a sports day or team sports and the playground has been converted into a set of 'non-violent' sandpits. Moreover, the school made the unilateral decision that all students should do craft with the Steiner teacher, without consulting the mainstream parents. The Principal's justification to a parent was that boys are 'difficult' and they would 'benefit' from the Steiner emphasis on craft.

There is clearly no evidential or experiential evidence for such ideas, nor for the many other gratuitous absurdities that riddle Steiner education, so any resemblance between Steiner education and good educational practice is purely coincidental. That a number of children have survived it, and some even thrived, says more about the resilience of the human spirit than about the efficacy of this empirically groundless theory.

Whether parents have the right to impose such aberrations as Steiner education on their children is a moot point, but it is absolutely certain that they have no right to exploit the state system so that other children are exposed to this nonsense. It is unconscionable that Victorian Education Department officials have allowed this to occur for so long. We must support the struggle to reaffirm the secular nature of public education.

► *The author acknowledges the assistance of Jenni Lans of Parents For Secular Education and a parent at Footscray City PS in the preparation of this article.*

► *For an earlier and more detailed discussion of Steiner Education, see: Ian Robinson 'The Rudolf Steiner Threat to Victorian Education', The Australian Rationalist, No 30, March 1992, pp 5–11.*

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