

21 APR 2015

Matthew Davies
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Dear Mr Davies

Thank you for your request of 11 March 2015 for the following information:

- *The findings of the preliminary investigation into the complaint of racism against Te Ra School.*

Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act).

On 20 December 2014 Helena Barwick issued a report about her preliminary investigation into the complaint of racism at Te Ra Waldorf School (Te Ra). While carrying-out the preliminary investigation, Ms Barwick spoke to the complainants, the school and a Senior Advisor from the Ministry. Ms Barwick then assessed the material provided by these parties to make her findings.

Ms Barwick found that the complainants raised genuine concerns about the existence of some racist comments embedded in the Steiner philosophy of Anthroposophy. She also found that the school's initial response to the complaints was inadequate, resulting in a number of staff, students and families leaving the school. It was noted that the school apologised for its initial management of the complaints, and had actively engaged with the community to discuss the issues raised. As you will be aware, the final investigation found no evidence of racist elements within the Te Ra school curriculum or in the delivery of the curriculum.

A copy of the preliminary investigation report is enclosed with this letter.

Thank you again for your request.

Yours sincerely



Katrina Casey
Deputy Secretary
Sector Enablement and Support

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Preliminary investigation into the complaint to Minister Parata about Te Ra School

Introduction

On Wednesday 11th December I was asked to investigate a complaint sent to Minister Parata about Te Ra School. The complaint was by email and very brief. The substance of the complaint is as follows:

We are writing to you as concerned previous staff and parents who have left Te Ra Waldorf School , Kapiti Coast. Our concerns are our discovery that the education system Rudolph Steiner created holds the view of a racial hierarchy and unfortunately these views are not just historical, but held by some teachers and are reflected within the curriculum. We understand a Ministry official has been investigating these claims and we would like to offer our help in showing people where the racism lies. We have left the school as we were unable to continue working there, it was unsafe for our children and ourselves and we were unable to show our colleagues how their ideas are considered as racist. Along with us, 4 other staff members (including the Maori teacher) and at least 25 families have left due to the same issue. (Email from Sophie Perkins and Krissy Dussler, 29 Nov 2013)

Given the time of year, I was asked to conduct a preliminary investigation and report to the Ministry before Christmas. This is the report of that initial investigation.

In preparing this report I have:

- met for two hours with the complainants
- met for two hours with the Principal and Board Chair of Te Ra School along with three members of the School's College of Teachers
- met briefly with the Ministry's Senior Advisor
- reviewed material provided to me by all of the above.

Meeting with the complainants

I met the complainants, Sophie Perkins and Krissy Dussler, on Friday 13th December. The complainants spoke of their commitment to Te Ra, the strengths of the school and the importance of the Te Ra community in their lives and that of their families. It was clear throughout our conversation that their motivation in raising their concerns is for the preservation of what has been special and precious to them, and to many others, about the Steiner approach to children and education.

However, having both worked at the school for many years and had children attending the school both women consider they have a well-informed perspective on the operation of the school and that over recent years they have become uncomfortable with some of what they have seen.

The complainants raised two main concerns in our conversation.

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- The ideological racism (and physical determinism) that is fundamental to the Steiner philosophy and which they say imbues current attitudes, teaching and approaches to children within the school.
- The unwillingness/inability of the school to properly consider/review the current impact and influence of Steiner beliefs within the school.

The complainants placed their concerns within a wider context. They directed me towards a wider and active debate about the relevance and appropriateness of some of Steiner's beliefs in a modern world. I have not yet had the opportunity to fully review this debate. A further element of their wider context is the way historical beliefs are maintained and reinforced in Steiner teacher training and through the advisers, priests and doctors who come from within New Zealand and from overseas to assist with the training of teachers and with their professional development and mentoring.

It is clear that the complainants' concerns are wider than what they believe is happening at Te Ra but that because Te Ra has been their Steiner community that is where they have chosen to direct their efforts to bring about change.

The complainants acknowledge that Te Ra has made some effort to audit the curriculum to ensure that historical and inappropriate ideas and beliefs are not being taught to children. However, they say that the ideas and beliefs are still present in the school – for example, in books readily available in the library – and are still deeply rooted in the philosophy of Waldorf pedagogy, adhered to by those teaching and that they can manifest themselves in attitudes, behaviours and responses to children.

The complainants feel they have been vilified for raising these concerns. They say this issue, and the inability of the Te Ra community to confront it and work through it, is the reason that a number of staff and families have recently left the school.

Meeting at Te Ra School

I met with the Principal of Te Ra School, the Board Chair and three teachers from the College of Teachers on Monday 16th December. I shared with them the concern raised in the email from the complainants to the Minister and provided them with the opportunity to give me their perspective of the situation.

Throughout the two hour meeting I was impressed by what seemed to be a genuine acceptance of the concerns the complainants have raised about some of the comments made in Steiner's teaching which can be construed as racist. The School acknowledges the worldwide debate around this strand of Anthroposophy.

The School said that its response to the concerns about racism within Anthroposophy when they were first raised at Te Ra in 2012 was slow, and could have been much better managed. Those at the meeting also expressed regret that at times the response was personal criticism of those raising the issues rather than a debate about the issue itself. They accept that this issue and its management have unsettled the School and its community to the extent that many families have left the School because of it. However, despite having made a slow start to exploring and responding to the issues the school has since taken a number of steps to address the complainants' concerns.

The Principal, teachers and Board Chair described to me some of the actions the School has taken since the concerns were first raised. These include:

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- In 2013 there have been three 'community conversations' to explore the issue. At one of these meetings the Principal gave an extended apology for the way the concerns had been responded to initially.
- The Principal has written to the school community (19 April 2013, 3 July 2013) addressing the issue, acknowledging shortcomings in the school's initial response and clarifying matters of both content and process.
- There has been a curriculum review to ensure that the curriculum does not reflect racism in any way. This has resulted in revised curriculum guidelines.
- A Declaration has been crafted, signed by all teachers at the school, and published which clearly rejects the premise of a racial hierarchy and disavows racism.
- The Principal has taken the concerns about racism to the Federation of Rudolph Steiner Waldorf Schools which has issued an Equity Statement which is now available on its website.
- The School's Ministry of Education Senior Advisor and Student Achievement Function have worked in the school with teachers looking at capabilities and cultural inclusiveness.
- The Kapiti Waldorf Trust, responsible for the special character of the School, is currently reviewing the articulation of its special character and has produced a draft for consultation which expresses unconditional commitment to upholding the Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and clearly states that it does not support Steiner's statements on race.

One of the frustrations for the School is that while they accept that some aspects of Steiner writings can be seen as racist they do not consider that instances of how this imbues the pedagogy or manifests itself in teaching and in the School have been made clear or concrete in a way that has enabled them to be addressed or countered.

My findings

In 2012 these complainants raised a genuine and valid concern about the existence of some racist comments embedded in the Steiner philosophy of Anthroposophy with the Board and management of Te Ra School. The complaint needs to be understood in the wider context of a worldwide debate about this element of Steiner's teaching. The complainants are very aware of the international debate and align themselves with worldwide efforts to reveal and reject racism within Anthroposophy.

Initially, the School's response to the complaints and the complainants was inadequate resulting in a number of staff and several students and families leaving the school. From 2013 the School has taken the complaints more seriously and has taken meaningful steps to address the concerns. The School acknowledges the existence of some racist writings within Anthroposophy, completely rejects them and is taking action to ensure that these views are neither present in the curriculum and pedagogy, nor reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of staff. The School has actively engaged with the community to discuss the issues and has apologised for its initial management of the complaints. In the course of this investigation the Principal expressed genuine gratitude to the complainants saying, *I am very grateful to them, we have done some stuff we needed to do.*

Accepting that there are some unacceptable racist views embedded within Anthroposophy, albeit as a small part of large body of writing, has been a painful realisation for many at Te Ra School. Asking and assisting those who are committed to Anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy to accept this and to re-examine their views and beliefs in light of it is not a quick or an easy process but it is one the School has embarked on and is committed to continuing with.

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This will continue to be a challenge for the School and particularly for those responsible for the special character under the integration agreement.

The School has received good support in these issues from the Ministry's senior advisor and a range of other assistance has also been put in place. In summary, the advice from the Ministry has been for each body in the school – the Board, the Kapiti Waldorf Trust, the College of Teachers, and school management to be clear about its roles and responsibilities and to act within them. This appears to be sound advice.

As with other integrated schools, the families who have chosen Te Ra, and the staff who work there have a strong investment in the special character of the School. This has resulted in considerable intensity when the School's special character has come under scrutiny. It is my view that the school is working through this, the process is not finished, and that it has been and may continue to be a difficult one. The School has sought and accepted a range of advice from outside and that is a good sign. In my view there is no clear merit in extending this investigation but there may be value in:

- further clarification of the appropriate focus for each of the groups involved in governance, management, teaching and special character
- continuing regular communication with the school community on work to address this issue
- continuing to work with the Federation and engage in the wider debate about the appropriate response to racist writings/beliefs in Anthroposophy.

Helena Barwick
20th December 2014

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