

Things you might say & ask in a letter about Steiner schools

This is a pick-and-mix situation. Also the following are couched very politely. It's up to you if you want to get stauncher; probably appropriate if you're contacting the media or an opposition spokesperson. Not so much if you want to be taken seriously by a Minister.

I have framed these with an 'obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi' lens. It feels to me like a timely and practical way to possibly get leverage. But there're plenty of other angles.

Some statements:

In 2016, following a complaint about Te Ra School, the Ministry of Education undertook a review into racism at the school and in the Steiner Waldorf school movement generally. The Steiner Waldorf school curriculum is based on Anthroposophy, a philosophy or religion developed by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925).

Quotes from the review:

"...those responsible for teaching and nurturing children at Te Ra and in other Steiner institutions in New Zealand are, by their training and background, imbued with a world view underpinned with a hierarchy of races that sees indigenous races as having lesser value..."

"The concerns raised...have substance and they are part of a worldwide issue. The writings of Rudolf Steiner are at the heart of the special character of Te Ra school, protected through the integration agreement, and some aspects of those writings are not compatible with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and New Zealand's education system."

"Those I spoke to agreed that the School does not promote the full impact of Anthroposophy on Waldorf pedagogy to parents. Anthroposophy is promoted in lectures and parent meetings, but the former teachers described a culture where parts of Anthroposophy are deliberately not discussed with parents on the basis that only those with a 'deep knowledge' of the 'spiritual science' of Anthroposophy will understand it and others may 'misinterpret' the teaching".

The review concluded that despite its concerns Te Ra was making efforts to change. It and all Steiner schools retained their State-integrated identity.

Anthroposophy is a complex, mystical and fundamental view of life from birth to death and beyond. Some of its key tenets are racist. These include a race-based theory of reincarnation, where souls repeatedly incarnate into physical bodies and in doing so 'ascend' through the races; notions of 'primary race traits'; and a race-based theory of evolution.

As they are State-integrated, Steiner schools are subject to The Education and Training Act.

In 2020 The Education and Training Act was amended. Section 127 made schools' obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi more explicit.

Under the Education and Training Act Steiner schools are required to teach the NZ Curriculum, including the new Aotearoa Histories Curriculum. This curriculum is official recognition of Aotearoa's colonial history and its enduring, inequitable impacts.

The Aotearoa NZ Histories Curriculum shares the country's whakapapa. It acknowledges that anything that has a beginning has whakapapa, including organisations, institutions, ideologies, and systems of belief.

The Aotearoa NZ Histories Curriculum vision is, "Me mātai whakamuri, kia anga whakamua. To shape Aotearoa New Zealand's future, let's start with the past".

Whakapapa is an intractable and enduring part of identity, both the good and bad bits. The concept is fundamental to tikanga, mātauranga and te ao Māori, and in Aotearoa it should be the place to start whatever the issue or circumstance.

Statements such as 'Steiner was a man of his time / concerns are historical / we have cherry-picked parts of Anthroposophy' deny both whakapapa and the impacts of systemic racism.

It is problematic for Steiner schools to teach Aotearoa's history and its impacts, but not those of their own organisation.

When schools engage with iwi, it should be done authentically and honourably through tikanga, which means whakapapa. When Steiner schools don't do this it may be said they're not acting ethically or honourably and could be failing in their individual and Crown obligations to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Aotearoa's Steiner schools are covert about their Anthroposophical foundations. Individual school websites rarely provide any detail about Rudolf Steiner or link to his writings. They do not generally mention Anthroposophy.

The limited information provided by Steiner schools does not allow for informed decisions by iwi, community, and prospective parents.

Steiner schools do not share the racist elements of their Anthroposophical whakapapa with their local iwi, community, or prospective parents.

Understandings of systemic racism and the need to meet its challenges through Te Tiriti o Waitangi are increasing. In the Government sector this is reflected through the revised Education and Training Act, the Aotearoa Histories Curriculum, the new agencies Māori Crown Relations Te Arawhiti and Te Aka Whai Ora Māori Health Authority.

While it may be that individual acts of racism within Steiner schools are rare, the broader more complex issue of systemic racism exists. This is also an issue for the education sector more broadly and all schools need to address it within themselves.

Although Anthroposophy isn't directly taught to children, it permeates everything within a Steiner school. Anthroposophy is a practice, pedagogy, or system; one that embodies Steiner's teachings.

One systemic example of Steiner's problematic teachings within the modern Steiner school is its use of seven-year 'child development stages'. This is based on Steiner's ideas about the seven-year life phases it requires for a reincarnated soul to enter the body. This in turn rests on Steiner's general theory of reincarnation which has its core a race-based hierarchy. If this is removed there is no purpose to the seven-year developmental stages. It is certainly not supported by developmental psychology, neuroscience, educational theory.

Ten of Aotearoa's Steiner schools are State-integrated. This means they receive public money and must teach the NZ Curriculum but do so through their 'special character'. Steiner schools' special character is anthroposophy.

While Steiner school efforts to incorporate more Te reo and tikanga Māori are positive, they need to work according to tikanga and te ao Māori, not simply teach lessons about them.

How do Rudolph Steiner's writings about race fit with the Government's agenda regarding ethnic diversity and inclusion? Do you think these should be disclosed by Steiner schools to their diverse communities, thus enabling informed consent?

Some questions:

Have there been any further reviews of Te Ra School, or Steiner schools generally, regarding the misalignment between the philosophy of Anthroposophy and Te Tiriti o Waitangi? If so what did it conclude and where might I find it?

Do you think Steiner schools' failure to disclose the racist elements of their whakapapa to iwi, communities and prospective parents is authentic and honourable engagement, as per tikanga?

Should Steiner schools have to disclose those racist elements of their Anthroposophical roots to local iwi, communities, and prospective parents? If not why?

When Steiner schools fail to disclose the racist views of their founder to iwi, community prospective parents are they meeting their obligations as a Crown entity?

When Steiner schools do not disclose the racist underpinnings of Anthroposophy, are they providing for informed consent?

Social, cultural and Government understandings of systemic racism are growing. For example [some examples here]. How are we to understand the systemic legacy of Anthroposophy in Steiner schools in this context? How does Government [and/or an individual organisation] understand it?

How do you [whoever you're writing to] reconcile the racist underpinnings of Anthroposophy with Te Tiriti o Waitangi?

As awareness of systemic racism grows, is it adequate for racism in schools to continue to be defined as personal? I.e. the acts of one person on another because of perceived racial characteristics?

Will Steiner schools be expected to address their own past when teaching that of Aotearoa via the new Aotearoa NZ Histories curriculum? If not does that undermine the Curriculum's vision?

How do Steiner schools rationalise those aspects of their curriculum that clearly rest on Steiner's theory of race-based reincarnation, for example, the use of seven-year development stages.

Do you think it is ethical for the public to fund schools that may not align with Te Tiriti o Waitangi?

Beyond the teaching of Te reo and Māori myths, how are Steiner honouring te Tiriti o Waitangi, including the Section 127 requirements of the revised Education and Training Act?

[To a Steiner school] Why is there not more information about Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy on your website? Where might I go to get more, including his theories on race traits and reincarnation?

[To a Steiner school] As a school in Aotearoa how important do you think tikanga and whakapapa are? How much of your Anthroposophical whakapapa do you disclose in your engagement with iwi? Do you disclose its racist aspects?

[To a Steiner school] Could you please clarify for me exactly which parts of Steiner's thinking are part of your curriculum and which parts aren't? If they are interdependent, in the way the seven-year developmental stages idea rests on the theory of an ascent through a reincarnation hierarchy, for example, how do you manage this? What is the alternative rationale for the seven-year emphasis?

Some links:

- 2016 Ministry of Education review: <https://fyi.org.nz/request/2486/response/8177/attach/3/909175.pdf>
- Education and Training Act: <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html>
- Education and Training Act Section 127: <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS274508.html>
- Rudolf Steiner Archive: <https://rsarchive.org/>
- Māori Crown Relations Te Arawhiti: <https://www.tearawhiti.govt.nz/>
- Aotearoa NZ Histories Curriculum: <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/changes-in-education/aotearoa-new-zealands-histories-and-te-takanga-o-te-wa/>
- Steiner School Education Aotearoa NZ: <https://seanz.org/>