

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

Under The Inquiries Act 2013

**In the matter of The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in
 State Care and in the Care of Faith-based institutions**

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RACHEL STEDFAST

October 2022

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1 My name is Rachel Stedfast. I am 39 years old. I am a member of the Gloriavale Christian Community (Community), Lake Haupiri, West Coast. I was born at Springbank and live in the Community.

2 I have a Diploma in Teaching obtained through the Open Polytechnic and I am Spalding Trained (Multisensory Instruction in Language Arts).

3 I am the acting School Principal at the Gloriavale Christian Community School. Previously I've been Centre Manager of three different Early Childhood Centres (ECE) in the Community. I have been a teacher for 20 years.

Teaching experience

4 When I was 17, I said that I would like to be a teacher at one of the ECE Centres. This was approved and I was accepted for the position. I tutored under my aunty, who was a registered teacher, for the first year or so. For a start, I worked at the over 2s Centre from 8:30am to 1:30pm, 5 days a week. I then moved to working until 3:45pm as I gained skills and knowledge.

5 I started training as a teacher at the age of 19, and I completed my training within 3 years and received provisional registration. A number of the women in the Community choose to pursue tertiary education and have level 7 qualifications. I have been fully registered as a teacher for 16 years.

6 I have taught in all four of our ECE centres and also for a time in the school as a stand-in teacher. Around four years ago, I was asked if I would like to take on the role of Centre Manager for one of our ECEs and I was happy to do so. I took on the role of Acting School Principal on 5th of August 2022.

7 I have worked with a committee of professional colleagues both within and outside the Community to review and grow our strategic plan for our community's education programme. This committee included three ladies and two men from within the community, and a well-recognised external consultancy firm.

Relationship with education-based agencies

8 Our school is privately run but the curriculum is based on the New Zealand Curriculum and the Bible, and all ECE staff and classroom teachers have teacher registration or suitable qualifications. The Education Review Office visits every three years to check our compliance with the Education and Training Act 2020.

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9 As Professional Leaders, a number of us have continuous contact with outside advisory agencies and have been to visit different schools all over New Zealand as part of growing our leadership capabilities. We network with Centre Managers and Principals from Education Services throughout the West Coast, Canterbury and the North Island.

10 We work with different government agencies, such as Ministry of Education, ERO, and the Teaching Council. All our teachers participate in many training events and travel to professional learning workshops to keep up to date with current pedagogy.

11 We have also engaged professional bodies to support us with teaching and supporting students with special learning needs and disabilities in our services. We have had a child with severe cerebral palsy, and we have special workers coming in on a regular basis to work with her and her teachers. Also, workers from BLENNZ and occupational therapists to help develop programmes for her development. We have had children with Downs Syndrome and neurodiverse learners that we have brought in SES workers and occupational therapists to work with these children in the classrooms.

12 Years ago, students with special learning needs were not identified promptly and because of insufficient training of individual teachers, these students were overlooked or accused of misbehaving. With the advancement of learning for teachers about neurodiversity available today, I can see that there were children whose learning needs were not met and who were not treated fairly or respectfully. Our vision is to provide an inclusive education system that provides for all learners regardless of their learning abilities.

Past and present approach of the school to abuse allegations

13 I acknowledge that there have been mistakes made. I have recently become aware that in 2012 and 2016 a former principal declared another teacher Just Standfast fit to be a teacher when he was not (Just Standfast had abused a student). Mr Standfast was later convicted, and his teaching registration was cancelled by the Teaching Council. The former principal apologised publicly to our community that he made a wrong decision (the events are set out in the *CAC v Pilgrim NZTDT 2021/35* decision on the Teaching Council's website). Now as the acting principal years later, I have to carry the heaviness of the reputation caused by that wrong decision, as it seems that the general public wants to continue blaming the community and everyone in it. I have a very strong teaching philosophy that I aim to protect the vulnerable and share my passion for teaching with parents, teachers and caregivers.

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14 The Community and the school in particular have made changes to make sure harm will not be dealt with in the same way again. Instead, any allegations of abuse will be handled according to Gloriavale's new Child Protection Policy, created in 2021 under guidance of an independent agency chosen by Oranga Tamariki. This policy is strong, and our intention in creating it was to provide a very high level of protection for all our children as a response to events that had happened in the past. When a complaint is made against a teacher, it is investigated immediately, and if serious that teacher is stood down, while a proper investigation with independent parties can take place. This Child Protection Policy has mandatory reporting to Oranga Tamariki and the Police and any other relevant regulatory bodies, such as, the Teaching Council. This policy has proven effective in recent months in the school, with several teachers being stood down pending an investigation.

15 We were devastated when we became aware of abuse occurring in our society and significant changes were made across every level of management. Even though family has been the centre of our community life, there is a renewed focus on family, to promote strong and trusting relationships between parents and children. Secure trusting relationships will support children to feel they can tell their parents about whether they are feeling unsafe or have experienced harm. One of the ways we insured more time for children to be with their parents was cutting back the time children spent in the Early Childhood centres. Instead of children attending approximately 30 hours a week they now attend approximately 20 hours a week. Also giving families the responsibility to organise after-school care, so parents have more control of their children's interactions with others.

16 All schoolteachers, Early Childhood teachers, Community leaders, Trustees, Mangers and parents have undertaken substantial training with Safeguarding Children, Empowerment Trust, and STOP and START on identifying abuse and providing support to complainants. The school has also incorporated training programmes for the children, including "Keeping Ourselves Safe" and "Life Education - Healthy Harold".

Incorporation of Māori culture into education system

17 My father (son of our founder, Hopeful Christian) often told me about his childhood days spent at the Tuahiwi pā. His family often spent days and even weeks living amongst the people there, sharing their food and living quarters with them. I remember video footage of a hāngī my grandfather filmed when my dad was a boy and my dad told me that as part of his dad's evangelical outreach, he often provided hāngī kai for the locals both at Tuahiwi and then later down at Cust. My dad often used simple te reo in everyday conversations with me and sometimes even gave me

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instructions in te reo Māori. I remember him saying, "Haere mai, ki te kai", when telling us it was time for dinner. Most of his friends growing up were the local Māori boys, which his family often took into their home to care for at times. A number of my aunts and uncles married Māori. So, I grew up with a lot of cousins with Māori ancestry.

18 During the course of my teacher training, I was privileged to experience life on two different Māori marae. Many of the teachers I was training with at the time found marae life very different to anything they had ever experienced before. Yet I found it very comfortable and normal, as it seemed so parallel to the life I lived in the Community. Could it be that some of the practical experiences my grandfather had on marae, influenced the way our community was set up?

19 I related to the way the tangata whenua worked together and shared what they had and what work there was to do. A Māori proverb speaks of this spirit of togetherness and helping one another. "Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou ka ora ai te iwi," "With your basket and my basket the people will thrive."

20 As a teacher and now acting school principal, I have implemented some of the learning from my time on ngā marae. In 1996, when the Ministry of Education first published Te Whāriki (Bicultural Curriculum for Early Childhood Services), our ECE centres along with all other ECE centres nationwide took it on board, and since then continue to participate in nationwide training and professional learning and development to find effective and meaningful ways to implement Te Whāriki curriculum into our everyday practice.

21 Because of Te Whāriki curriculum, I feel that Early Childhood Education is further on in their bicultural journey than the school system, but I can see that the school is still on a very progressive journey up hill. We are in the process of reviewing and developing our Bicultural Policy for our licensed Early Childhood Services. In fact, a professional from Massey University complimented us, a number of years ago, on how inclusive our Bicultural Policy is of the Te Tiriti o Waitangi. We also use InterLEAD, which is well recognised for leading educators across Aotearoa in the most recent updates from the government, to help us understand how the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi can be more effectively implemented into our practice. Professionals from InterLEAD visit onsite at least three times a year with regular video conferencing throughout the year.

22 Our Early Childhood Educators have participated in many nationwide projects such as, Matika Maranga hosted by Core Education which consisted of seven

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different evening workshops in Greymouth, Working with Tātaiako (which was launched in 2011 by the Ministry of Education) and Leadership training through Massey University. Our training with professionals from Massey included exploring Tātaiako's five cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners, where our educators participated in a series of workshops to explore and brainstorm effective and meaningful ways to implement these competencies into our everyday teaching practice.

23 A couple of years ago I personally conducted an inquiry into how effective our centres were implementing the Principles and Strands of the updated Te Whāriki (2017) into our curriculum. In doing so I was introduced to a project document that the Education Review Office had put out regarding their evaluations of the implementation of Te Whāriki in education services across the country, titled "Te Whāriki (2017): Awareness Towards Implementation". Considering the constant criticism Gloriavale receives on how inferior our education systems are, I was pleasantly surprised, after analysing our practice, to find that implementation of Te Whāriki in our Early Childhood centres was not in the lowest bracket. It wasn't in the highest bracket either, but it was slightly above average.

24 Students in our ECE Centres and School have learned waiata, aspects of Māori history, mihi composition and have created poi and woven harakeke. Most of my own children who go to the Gloriavale Christian School have learnt multiple waiata and can sing them fluently, performing for visitors to the school and at public community functions. Just recently my 13-year-old performed a poi dance with her class in front of 600 people, as part of a class project on New Zealand history. Teachers teach correct pronunciation of Māori words, as well as the associated meanings of place names, fauna and flora. Some teachers use te reo Māori for basic instructions to the students.

25 The school has recently introduced a House system, which aligns with the Whare Tapa Wha, a 4-dimension Māori model of well-being, developed in 1998 by Sir Mason Durie, and encourages tuakana-teina and manaakitanga relationships.

26 Currently, two schoolteachers are studying for a teaching degree which uses the bicultural model of Te Rito Maioha, a new government learning incentive where teachers do two days of practical training a week in a classroom with an associate teacher. It is expected that these teachers will graduate with a foundational knowledge of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori and utilise these skills at the Gloriavale Christian School.

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Dated October 2022

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Rachel Stedfast

