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CRITICALLY ASSESSING THE REPUTATION OF WALDORF EDUCATION IN ACADEMIA AND THE PUBLIC

EARLY ENDEAVOURS OF EXPANSION, 1919–1955

Edited by

Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann and Marc Fabian Buck



Critically Assessing the Reputation of Waldorf Education in Academia and the Public: Early Endeavours of Expansion, 1919–1955

The first of two volumes dedicated to this little-explored topic, this volume gathers international perspectives to critically assess how Waldorf education has been perceived and discussed in both public and academic arenas. The book thereby challenges the historical concept of Waldorf education as an international movement championing “progressive education.”

Spanning the period 1919–1955, this first volume looks at countries with a longstanding tradition of Waldorf schools: Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Austria, and Finland. The second volume, which covers the period 1987–2004, focuses on more recent developments in Japan, Israel, Spain, Poland, Kenya, France, Slovenia, and China. Throughout both books, over 25 leading scholars present 16 case studies spanning 14 countries to discuss the history and perception of Waldorf education in the context of respective school systems and societies. By exploring the ramifications of these case studies against the background of existing research, the books offer cutting-edge perspectives and prompts for scholarly debates for this as-yet under-researched field.

This book will be of interest to researchers, scholars, and postgraduate students in international and comparative education, the theory of education, and the philosophy of education. Policy makers interested in the history of education, as well as practicing teachers and school staff at Waldorf education institutions, may also benefit from the volume.

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Foreword

Waldorf Education in an International Context: Critical Perspectives

Peter Staudenmaier

Waldorf education has presented a challenge to researchers for more than a century. Since the first Waldorf school was founded in 1919, the movement has defied conventional expectations while dividing external observers. Whether in terms of its pedagogical principles or its broader cultural connotations, the Waldorf brand has elicited charged reactions from the beginning. Along with the insular nature of the Waldorf milieu, such factors complicate scholarly research. Innovative studies of Waldorf education have nonetheless found creative ways to meet the challenges of this subject. Though generally focused on particular national cases, these studies have produced important insights about an unorthodox school movement that is growing around the world.

This project represents a new step in international research on Waldorf education, bringing together scholars from different parts of the globe to examine Waldorf schooling through a variety of perspectives while engaging in transnational and cross-disciplinary dialogue. It offers an opportunity for a comparative study of a contested form of alternative pedagogy in a range of societal contexts. The contributors include younger researchers as well as established academics, Waldorf insiders as well as outside analysts, education scholars as well as specialists in religious studies, history, anthropology, and other fields. A collection like this is of obvious relevance at a time of ongoing expansion for the Waldorf movement worldwide and is all the more remarkable in light of the hurdles to scholarly assessment of Waldorf practices. Even as the movement has matured, the longstanding challenges to research on Waldorf education have remained evident.

The chief reason for these challenges lies in the Waldorf movement's historical origins. Initially established in Germany in the wake of the First World War, Waldorf schools trace their inception to the charismatic figure of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), an esoteric teacher who sought a novel educational model in accord with his spiritual philosophy (Zander, 2011; Brandt & Hammer, 2013; Ullrich, 2014). Steiner called his worldview “anthroposophy,” an offshoot of theosophy – prominent parts of the modern occult revival around the turn of the 20th century. For Steiner and his followers, anthroposophy was a “spiritual science” capable of countering the materialism that clouded modern life. In contrast to ordinary scientific methods,

anthroposophy offered access to the “higher worlds” which shape the cosmos and guide human affairs.¹ Although anthroposophy is well known to scholars of esotericism, its tenets are often unfamiliar among those drawn to Waldorf education, leaving a significant gap between external perceptions and internal realities.

Waldorf schools today – known as Steiner schools in some countries – remain inseparable from Steiner’s complex legacy. This has led to repeated controversies in the century since Steiner’s death, further encumbering critical research on Waldorf education. The internal dynamics of the anthroposophist movement have played a central role in these conflicts. Early observers noted that “a great many” anthroposophists were “absolutely uncritical and believe anything Dr. Steiner tells them” (Clemen, 1924, p. 291; compare Leese, 1921; Leisegang, 1922; Oesterreich, 1923). Steiner and his followers reacted defensively toward critical inquiry from the start, viewing external scrutiny as a threat to anthroposophy’s spiritual integrity. Whether reports from journalists, studies by academics, or curious queries from other sources, outside accounts of anthroposophy were cast as hostile attacks by opponents and enemies. Anthroposophists published voluminous responses to such supposed attacks both during and after Steiner’s lifetime, as opportunities for dialogue turned into embittered disputes (see Steiner, 1914b; Werbeck, 1924; Levy, 1932; Heyer, 1932).

These same dynamics applied to the Waldorf movement as well. One of the earliest academic assessments of Waldorf education appeared in 1926 as a dissertation at the University of Bonn, based on observation at the Waldorf school in nearby Cologne. The dissertation took a respectful tone toward Steiner, who had died a year earlier, and offered both critical and appreciative judgments on Waldorf pedagogy, welcoming its practical achievements while questioning its ideological foundations (Hövels, 1926). However, the enraged anthroposophical response to the study showed that more than academic niceties were at stake. An article in the premier German anthroposophist journal denounced the dissertation as a “scandal,” dismissing its conclusions as “borderline idiotic” and “dilettantish charlatanry” and calling its author “moronic and unscrupulous” (Lauer, 1927).² Incidents like these set the tenor for decades to come.

Like other educational innovations, Waldorf schools did face real opposition. Some of the criticisms raised against the schools were scurrilous. Waldorf proponents, however, often mistook legitimate scholarly analysis for antagonism, and academic research suffered accordingly. Mainstream pedagogical institutions, meanwhile, frequently ignored the Waldorf movement. The roots of this mutual disregard lay partly in Waldorf precepts themselves,

1 Early presentations in English include Steiner (1908, 1910, 1914a, 1918), Collison (1916), Kaufmann (1922).

2 Lauer was a prominent anthroposophist and longtime Waldorf teacher.

such as the rejection of “intellectualism” and the suspicion toward “critical thinking.”³ A more fundamental concern had to do with the extent to which anthroposophical presuppositions structured the Waldorf curriculum and teaching methods. The 1926 dissertation quoted a teacher from the Cologne Waldorf school declaring that anthroposophy formed “the foundation of all pedagogy” (Hövels, 1926, p. 66).

Throughout the evolution of the Waldorf movement, this issue has continued to vex efforts at dialogue between researchers and Waldorf practitioners. Combined with debates over the religious character of anthroposophy, the subject generates intractable arguments. It is not merely a theoretical question; in countries like the United States with constitutional requirements about separation of church and state, it has crucial implications for public funding (Rhea, 2012). From a scholarly point of view, the anthroposophical nature of Waldorf education seems clear, amply confirmed by current sympathetic studies (compare Goldshmidt, 2017; Pearce, 2019; Binetti, 2020; Marques, 2020). The more difficult problem is whether Waldorf schools will be able to move beyond their anthroposophist inheritance: “It is an open question if the Waldorf educational system could be open for changes and modernisation or not” (Frisk, 2012, p. 209).

Recent years have seen related reservations about the Waldorf movement arise in public discussion and scholarly studies alike, many of them addressed in this book, and the positive potentials of Waldorf education have received increasing attention as well. Waldorf representatives have become more open to engagement with academic counterparts, with occasional initiatives toward collaborative research. The participation of Waldorf colleagues in this book shows the progress that has been made. There are fruitful areas for further critical study, from the role of the teacher as the authority in Waldorf classrooms to the influence of Steiner’s racial teachings to the well-nigh mythical stature of Steiner himself.⁴ Viewed from an international perspective, this growing body of scholarship points to important possibilities for the future. If Waldorf schools are to fulfill their promise of a meaningful alternative to conventional educational offerings, they will need to consider the findings of independent investigators whose methods diverge from the esoteric premises of anthroposophy. Whatever the outcomes, research on Waldorf education can enrich and deepen our understanding of its successes and shortcomings and provide a more informed basis for ongoing deliberation.

3 For standard warnings against “intellectualism,” see Hartlieb (1928, pp. 16–18, 50–51), on the dangers of “critical thinking,” see, e.g., Steiner (1996, pp. 46–47, 58–59) and Gardner (1975, pp. 127–128).

4 For perceptive treatments, see Powell (2012), Dhondt, P. et al. (2015), Horn (2018), Mendus (2021), Wilson (2022), Martins (2022), Hallensleben (2023).

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Introduction

Waldorf Education as an (Inter)National Phenomenon and Subject of Discourse

Marc Fabian Buck and Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann

On the Worldwide Phenomenon of Waldorf Education Today

In April 2023, the 11th *World Teachers' Conference* for Waldorf school and kindergarten teachers took place at the world centre of Anthroposophy, the *Goetheanum* in Dornach/Switzerland. Under the title *Affirming – Nurturing – Trusting, an Education for Today and Tomorrow*. The conference celebrated this pedagogy not as a completed journey but as a pedagogy for the future. Why the characteristic of timelessness is not also claimed to the same extent for the (undoubtedly successful past) past and whether this indicates a changed relationship and self-image to one's own tradition is something we can only speculate about for the time being. What can be stated, however, is this: Waldorf education has had considerable success all over the world since the founding of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart/Germany in 1919. Thus, at the *World Teachers' Conference*, which was attended by 1,000 Waldorf teachers from 62 countries, the Waldorf movement celebrated itself as an international movement (Goetheanum, 2023).

The intention to represent an international (or global) supra-temporal pedagogy is no surprise, given Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical superstructure and aspirations. He already understood Waldorf education as a movement that transcended borders, the teachers as “missionaries of human development” (Steiner, 1921a, p. 138),¹ and with the lecture tours he undertook in the last years of his life, he himself laid the foundation for international dissemination (cf. Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 112; Stehlik, 2019, p. 69). Not only did he inspire contemporary educators to found Waldorf schools, but his 1921 plea in The Hague/Netherlands for a “world school association” (Steiner, 1921b, p. 55) provided the impetus for an international exchange that found its institutionalised form in 1970 with the *Hague Circle*, the *International Forum for Steiner/Waldorf Education* (IK) (cf. Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 389). Formally affiliated with the *Pedagogical Section* of the

1 This and all following quotes, if not in the original English language, were translated by the authors.

Anthroposophical Society in Dornach/Basel, Switzerland, its main goal is “to strengthen and deepen the identity of Waldorf education with its inner foundations and to find the necessary forms for this” (Zech, 2016, p. 16). This is done especially in cooperation with Waldorf associations on a national level, such as the *Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen* (BdFWS) [Association of Free Waldorf Schools] in Germany, continental associations such as the *Association of Waldorf Schools of North America* (AWSNA), the worldwide *International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education* (IASWECE), and others (cf. Zech, 2016, p. 16). Waldorf educators (especially from Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Scandinavia) have followed Steiner’s example and carried his ideas to various countries around the world, whether through lectures, conferences or by founding their own schools (cf. Stehlik, 2019, p. 90). With the *Hague Circle* and the *Friends of Waldorf Education* association, there have now been institutions dedicated to expanding Waldorf education and supporting teacher training and continuing education since the 1970s (Steiner Waldorf World, n.d.).² The *Friends of Waldorf Education* alone have been able to support more than 830 Waldorf initiatives – in terms of personnel, ideas and, not least, financially (Steiner Waldorf World, n.d.).³

The great importance of teacher training for Waldorf education and the continuation of its school movement is expressed, among other things, in the growing number of teacher training institutions (cf. Oberman, 2008, pp. 277–278), which have joined together, among others, in the *International Network of Academic Steiner Teacher Education* (INASTE) (Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 382). Beyond their mediating, these institutions function as “vehicles of institutional memory” (Oberman, 2008, p. 277), and not infrequently, they are the starting point for Waldorf educational research, even though this is not necessarily directed at an academic audience (Gidley, 2010, p. 207). The English-language journal *Research on Steiner Education* (RoSE),⁴ published by representatives of the *Rudolf Steiner College* in Oslo/Norway and the *Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences* in Alfter/Germany, as well as the online platform *International Waldorf Campus*,⁵ initiated by Jost Schieren (*Alanus*), exemplify this dual function of Waldorf teacher training

2 See also, by way of example, for Taiwan, Tang (2010, pp. 1, 29–30), for India, Nikias (2014, pp. 2–3) and for Russia, Plumb-Mentjes (2012, p. 27).

3 The question of financing is constitutive and arises all the more urgently in view of the predominantly private sponsorships for the schools and the mostly non-governmental training courses. The Waldorf movement, like the anthroposophical movement as a whole, relies here not only on donations from its members and supporters, but, above all, on a hitherto largely unexplored network of foundation and corporate structures (Zander, 2019, pp. 119–120, 229).

4 Research on Steiner Education (RoSE) (n.d.). Home. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230807040456/www.rosejournal.com/index.php/rose/index> (memento from 2023, August 7).

5 International Waldorf Campus (n.d.). Home. <https://web.archive.org/web/20240303183122/https://www.international-campus-waldorf.com/> (memento from March 3, 2024).

as well as its internationalisation.⁶ The biennial *World Teachers' Conferences* organised by the *Pedagogical Section* are ceremonial highlights of this development – the Waldorf world as a guest in the heart and home of the *Anthroposophical Society*.

State of Research and Desiderata

In its century-long existence, the Waldorf School movement has advanced “from outsider to leader of the Reform Education International”⁷ (Ullrich, 2006, p. 142; cited in Frielingsdorf, 2019). Therefore – and in view of internationalisation and expansion as a central “gravitational field” of anthroposophy (cf. Zander, 2019, p. 10) – the clear disproportion to international, comparative, historical and, above all, critical (educational science) research in this field is all the more astonishing.⁸ While there exists an almost unmanageable number of publications on the introduction to Waldorf education, its genuine characteristics and how these are to be implemented didactically-methodologically, the global dissemination remains comparatively opaque. For example, the “Reports from the International Waldorf School Movement”, as Frans Carlgren (1981) subtitled his book *Erziehung zur Freiheit* [Education towards Freedom], first published in 1972 and meanwhile in its 12th edition, is mainly an affirmative presentation of Waldorf education and its anthroposophical foundations, with brief notes on school foundations outside Germany. Conversely, the anthology *Anthroposophie und Waldorfpädagogik in den Kulturen der Welt* [Anthroposophy and Waldorf Education in the Cultures of the World] by Stefan Leber (1997b) provided deeper insights into anthroposophical educational practice in other countries, but only in the

6 The academisation and institutionalisation of Waldorf education and its teacher training becomes, in part, a research subject itself; see, for example, Spence, M. (2013). *The Story of Emerson College: Its Founding Impulse, Work and Form*. Temple Lodge Press.

7 In any case, it is also noteworthy that (large) parts of the Waldorf scene consciously distance themselves from being appropriated as a (typical) progressive-educational current (cf. Schieren, 2015; Frielingsdorf, 2016; Loebell, 2016; Nieke, 2016). One reason for this lies in the claimed supratemporality of the pedagogical concept, which, from the perspective of educational history, has very great similarities with similar reform pedagogical endeavours stemming from the same era (cf. Böhm, 2012). The claimed proprium of the specific (anthroposophical) anthropology (cf. Schieren, 2015, p. 128) also seems to be less plausible when looking more closely at the influence of theosophy on the superstructure and practice of Montessori education (cf. Hofer, 2001), which has so far been given little consideration in scholarship.

In real historical terms, however, different patterns and speeds of dissemination can be discerned through processes of institutionalisation and organisation (e.g., through separate teacher training institutions). In this respect, Waldorf education differs decisively from licensing models (Montessori) and conceptual designs which are very often associated with progressive education, for example, with Dewey. Cf. also Jürgen Oelker's contribution in this volume.

8 It should be noted here that this assessment is mainly limited to the German-speaking and anglophone research landscape due to the authors' language skills.

form of subjective reports on experiences in the Waldorf movement⁹; moreover, both were published only in German. The *Friends of Waldorf Education* (2001) published shortly thereafter, on their 30th anniversary, the volume *Waldorfpädagogik Weltweit* [Waldorf Education Worldwide] with reports from 60 countries, which also had the character of anecdotal portraits. An insight into the work of the *Pädagogische Forschungsstelle Stuttgart* [Pedagogical Research Center] published in 2015 does not show any decided preoccupation with the topic of internationalisation (Boettger, 2015). However, in the following year, an attempt was made via a presentation of the various organisations worldwide to at least create awareness of the role of German Waldorf education in and for the international movement (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2016).

The few empirical studies that have focused on the international dissemination of Waldorf education represent a normative perspective, taking as their starting point the educational principles formulated by Steiner and, therefrom, looking at these principles' implementation in various countries. In this way, Earl J. Ogletree (1998), in his *International Survey of the Status of Waldorf Schools*, examined the relationship of existing schools and their teachers in an international context with the principles of Waldorf education, as has Gidley (2010). In addition to exploring the relationship of Waldorf teachers to Rudolf Steiner's writings, Gidley's work aimed to survey the global state of research on Waldorf education (Gidley, 2010, p. 207) – a fight against windmills.

Increased attention was given to the topic of internationalisation in 2019, when the 100th anniversary of the first Waldorf school was celebrated worldwide after the adage *Waldorf 100 – Learn to Change the World*.¹⁰ As anniversaries go, the focus was on the past as well as the future, and a balance sheet was drawn up. The latter was marked by the global spread of Steiner's pedagogy. Thus, on the one hand, historical research works appeared, such

9 This publication reveals a mode of engagement with the worldwide phenomenon of Waldorf education that still occurs time and again: the mode of *reporting on practice* in other places and *interviewing Waldorf educators from* different countries and cultures from a (most commonly) European anthroposophical point of view, which in turn barely allows the global actors in Waldorf education to speak for themselves – or only within a given framework. One reason for this may be that the founding of many Waldorf initiatives in the world was initiated by, or at least accompanied by, anthroposophists from Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Nevertheless, the question arises as to what extent this mode, which proves a desideratum, and thus is to be examined more closely, is akin to a missionary one that has normative effects with regard to the question of what Waldorf education is or can be in the world.

10 Waldorf 100 (n.d.). *Learn to Change the World*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20240303183516/https://www.waldorf-100.org/en/> (memento from March 3, 2024). At the same time, the founders of the *Intercultural Waldorf School Mannheim*, Adam and Schmelzer (2019), took up internationality in miniature, the reflection on inter- and transculturality as well as related topics such as multilingualism, migration and flight in the school community and in the subject lessons with their anthology in 2019; a topic which, in view of the rather homogeneous and still below-average diverse student body at Waldorf schools, has so far been underrepresented not only in everyday school life but also in research.

as the three-volume, 2,000-page monumental monograph by Nana Göbel¹¹ (2019) and *Die Waldorfschule und ihre Menschen. Weltweit* [The Waldorf School and its People. Worldwide] as well as the *Geschichte der Waldorfpädagogik. Von ihrem Ursprung bis zur Gegenwart* [History of Waldorf Education. From its origins to the present] by Volker Frielingsdorf (2019). In it, Frielingsdorf repeatedly took a step back from his reconstruction of German Waldorf education and described the waves of expansion going on simultaneously outside Germany as well as the reception of Waldorf education by the (educational) public and (educational) science. Thomas Stehlik's (2019) history of Waldorf education, subtitled "An International View of 100 Years", offers an extensive introduction to its characteristics and specifics, which was followed by a passage through the decades and thus the different paths of expansion. Since only 16 (from 11 countries) responded to the email interview request he undertook, out of potentially over 1,000 Waldorf schools, "The A to Z of Waldorf Education – From Australia to Zanzibar" provides only selective insights into the Waldorf reality with its characteristics and hurdles, although the common set of questions here provides the basis for an initial comparative view (Stehlik, 2019, pp. 158–159).

In contrast, the works of Antonio Marques (2020) and Martin Rawson (2021) were more future-oriented. In his dissertation, Marques identified new hurdles and stagnation with simultaneous – or resulting – increased questions and needs for reflection on the "global future" of Waldorf education:

The intent of this critical study is to tease out from a hermeneutic engagement with teachers' lived experiences, areas of dysfunction in Steiner Waldorf (SW) praxis, as well as to offer new narratives that might contribute to the renewal of SWE in the 21st century.

(Marques, 2020, p. ii)

He reflects on Waldorf education along the tensions between theory and practice, aspiration and reality, supra temporality and transformation(s) (esp. Marques, 2020, pp. 85–110). In doing so, he concludes, "The call for transformative renewal cannot place the burden for such change on the shoulders of a single thinker, even one as majestic as Steiner" (Marques, 2020, p. 323), thus extending into the future the mission of the Waldorf educational community to carry Steinerian pedagogy into the world. The work of Rawson (2021, p. 1), in turn, "traces the origins of Steiner education from the original Waldorf school and shows how this approach has since been adapted and

11 Simultaneously published by Göbel was the illustrated book *Einblicke weltweit* [Insights Worldwide] (Friends of Waldorf Education, 2019) and *100 Jahre Erziehung zur Freiheit. Waldorfpädagogik in den Ländern der Welt* [100 Years of Education for Freedom. Waldorf Education in the Countries of the World] (Göbel & Reinthal, 2019), which contain richly illustrated short portraits of everyday Waldorf education around the globe.

applied in educational settings around the world”. Identifying 18 underlying principles, he also undertakes a reinterpretation of contemporary Waldorf education – “not as it is practised everywhere today, but rather what constitutes (in my judgement) best practice and the current Waldorf discourse, which has changed significantly over the last 15 years”, thus claiming to go beyond mainly non-comparative curriculum debates that often form the core of renewal efforts (Rawson, 2021, p. 5, 151). Likewise focused on the future, the anthology *The Understanding of the Human Being in Waldorf Education across the World’s Diverse Cultures* is dedicated from an affirmative standpoint to the “salient features of Waldorf education” – “its concern with healthy human development” and “its versatility” (Kullak-Ublick & Zdražil, 2019, p. 7), thus defining anthroposophical anthropology as a constitutive moment of its international connectivity and dissemination, as illustrated by several articles. In addition, there are some articles dealing with the necessity of the renewal of Waldorf education, especially with regard to its global dissemination from a normative perspective (Boland, 2017; Boland & Rohde, 2022). Beyond the publications mentioned previously, attempts at systematising the globalisation of Steiner’s pedagogy developed from empirical work on individual countries can be found, for example, in Ida Oberman’s (2008) historical study of *The Waldorf Movement in Education from European Cradle to American Crucible, 1919–2008* or in Neil Boland (2015). Although we do not (and cannot) claim to be exhaustive, as some case studies on Waldorf education in individual countries will only be found in the epilogue, it becomes clear that the internationalisation of Waldorf education as a historical development, and even more so as a current discourse and pluralisation or individualisation process, (cf. Zander, 2019) is a desideratum in research.

Ideas, Institutions, Practices and Their Paths Through the World

This obvious difference between unquestionably successful practice and its incomparably limited exploration as a scientific object represents the starting point of our research project. Without doing motivational research on why this *schism between practice and research* exists, our interest lies in what is focused in each case when Waldorf education becomes a topic and what status Rudolf Steiner’s education occupies in the various parts of the world over which it is so unequally distributed.

If one considers the absolute number of Waldorf institutions as of September 2022, the latest official address list called *Waldorf World List* mentions 1,270 Waldorf schools and 1,928 kindergartens are listed in 75 countries. It should be noted that this approximation is not without problems because it is a Waldorf education qua licensing or declaration and risks obscuring the practices behind it.¹² Trademark rights for *Waldorf* and *Rudolf Steiner* are (still) held by the

12 While it was possible for the BdFWS in Germany to steer the differentiation process during the great educational expansion from the 1950s onwards in an orderly manner by institutionally

Association of Free Waldorf Schools, although since 2016, efforts have been made to hand them over to an “international body” that would combine the efforts of the *International Conference of the Waldorf Education Movement* and the *International Association for Waldorf Early Childhood Education* (IASWECE) (Thomas, 2016). The “Essential Characteristics” for recognition as a licensed Waldorf institution have been published by the IK in a nine-page paper (Hague Circle, 2016), with the last two pages containing (to date!) not yet adopted characteristics for so-called “Waldorf inspired schools”.

A look at the rough spatial distribution of Waldorf schools¹³ by continent (Table 0.1) teaches us something astonishing about the exact dispersion,

Table 0.1 Distribution of the current 1,270 Waldorf schools according to the official Waldorf World List from September 2022 (Friends of Waldorf Education, 2022).

<i>(Sub) Continent</i>	<i>Absolute Number of Waldorf Schools (Worldwide Percentage)</i>
Africa	23 (1.8%)
North America	142 (11.2%)
Middle America	30 (2.4%)
South America	67 (5.3%)
Asia	73 (5.7%)
Europe	862 (67.9%)
Oceania incl. Australia	73 (5.8%)

connecting and integrating the parents, who in many cases were the initiators of the school founding initiatives (Frielingsdorf, 2019, pp. 269, 291), this was already more difficult in the international context. For example, Zander (2019, pp. 52–53) uses the example of China to argue that Stuttgart lacks possibilities for control, especially due to the grassroots-like emergence of the countless Waldorf initiatives, which only take shape again with the transfer to an institutionalisation phase, including teacher training and the emergence of a (local) Waldorf identity, own umbrella organisations, etc. A vague idea of the possible discrepancy can be given by India, where, according to Nikias (2014, p. 2), there are four recognised and over 50 Waldorf-inspired schools. Even this leaves out of view those in which Waldorf educational practices are applied without any reference to Steiner – assuming that practices can be determined as Waldorf educational regardless of their derivation from the anthroposophical study of man or the attitude and conviction of the teachers and educators. Nonetheless, with licensing, the educational field of practice has an instrument of control and sanction, while in view of the precarious situation of the *Anthroposophical Society*, other fields of practice (medicine, agriculture) are held together solely by “Steiner and his work” (Zander, 2019, pp. 11–12).

13 The focus on Waldorf schools, largely ignoring kindergartens and curative Camphill institutions, is based on our assumption that it is only possible to speak about Waldorf education in a historically comparative way when systems have been established that have a certain degree of complexity. The establishment and accreditation of a Waldorf kindergarten, which would be the antithesis, can be done more easily and quickly than the establishment of even one school because it involves far-reaching questions of teacher qualification and further training, professional and international exchange and the adherence to and quality assurance of a curriculum that has remained quasi-constant for over 100 years. In addition, schools

perhaps primarily that the distribution of the educational concept as a practice is concentrated in Europe (67.9% of all schools) and North America (11.2% of all schools). Only 1.8% of all Waldorf schools are located on the African continent, and only 6% on the Asian continent, which, after all, is home to half of the world's population. In addition, the mere number of schools per country is of limited significance, as the schools are often of different sizes and, in an international comparison, tend to be smaller than in Germany, for example (Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 362).

“Europe is the dominant presence in the world, and Germany is the dominant presence in Europe” (Paull & Hennig, 2020, p. 28). That the German-speaking world is the centre, is hardly surprising due to the two main centres of Waldorf education where Rudolf Steiner's work manifests itself to this day: on the one hand Germany with the first Waldorf school and the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools*; on the other hand Switzerland, which has always been a counterweight with the *Goetheanum* and seat of the *Anthroposophical Society*, including the *Pedagogical Section* and the *Hague Circle*, as well as the *School of Spiritual Science* (Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 112).¹⁴ The *distribution* emanating from this epicentre, which is *eurocentric* in the literal sense of the word, is – it can be assumed – attributable to historical developments such as, among other things, phases of educational expansion and (geo-)political changes,¹⁵ which need to be outlined in more detail. First of all, it is worth taking a look at the relative density of Waldorf schools within a national school system (Figure 0.1).

In terms of the relative density of schools within a given country, a differentiated picture emerges. Estonia is now at the top, where statistically, about 120,000 inhabitants share a Waldorf school, which amounts to 8.3 schools per million Estonians. It is followed in second and third place by the Netherlands (7.2 schools per million) and Norway (6.1 schools per million), two countries with a longstanding Waldorf tradition. Germany, as the cradle of Waldorf education, is in the upper middle, with just three schools per million. It is also noteworthy that France, for example, has a relatively low density (3.6 million inhabitants per school or 0.28 schools per million people), for

are generally subject to stricter institutional requirements and political and administrative regulation and control.

14 At this point, it must remain open for the time being how this centralism of the norm-giving structures in the course of the expansion of Waldorf education, its implementation and reception, as well as whether or how the internationalisation, for its part, has an effect on the centre.

15 As Eija Horn writes: “The exact reasons for the rapid dissemination of Waldorf schools – offshoots in nine countries by 1930 – are largely in the dark. Zander [2007] provides no information, and Skiera [2010, p. 234] can only speculate. Ullrich notes that schools sprang up where sections of anthroposophy that spoke German invited Rudolf Steiner to lectures, i.e., in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia [Ullrich, 2011, p. 52]” (Horn, 2017, p. 81, fn 11).

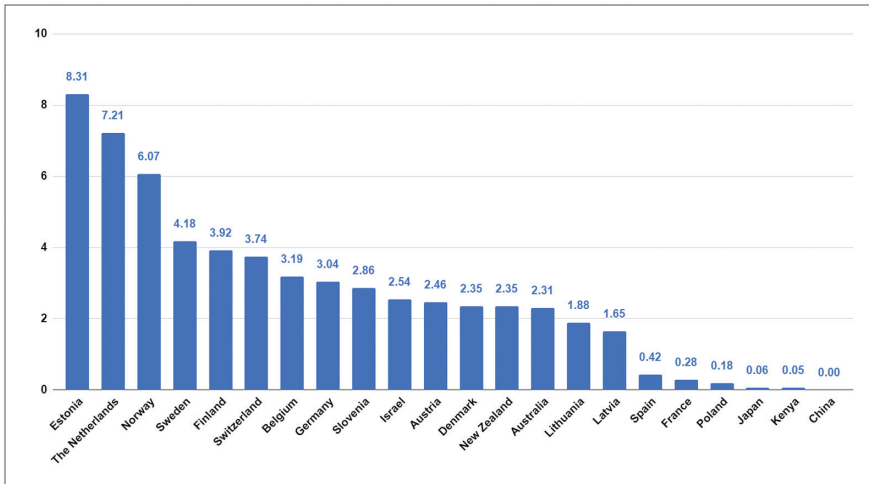


Figure 0.1 Waldorf schools per 1 Million inhabitants by country (including the countries presented in this project). This is our own representation according to the *Waldorf World List* (Friends of Waldorf Education, 2022) and *The World Factbook* (population estimates for 2023).

which there are various reasons (cf. the contribution by Bérengère Kolly in the second volume). At the lower end of the range are Kenya – where about 19 million inhabitants share one Waldorf school (0.05 per million) – and China, where are about 235 million(!) inhabitants per one of the six official Waldorf schools (0.004 per million). This indicates the limits of descriptive statistics (or operationalisation), since it can be assumed that there are practices of Waldorf education in various countries that are not accredited in the sense of the *Hague Circle* or the *European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education* (ECSWE), or for political, economic or other reasons do not even strive for this process, but work to varying degrees according to the guiding principles of Waldorf education (see, for instance, the case study on China).¹⁶

16 The ontological question of what Waldorf education *is* cannot be answered statistically. However, if we follow the official statistics of the *Waldorf World List*, it can be plausibly asserted that a common, and therefore comparable, idea and self-commitment is followed to run this sort of school.

Waldorf education is not alone in this problem. For Montessori education, Winfried Böhm (2010, pp. 60–61) sharply remarks: “One will not be able to deny that different ways can lead to the occupation with the Montessori pedagogy. However, it is equally undeniable that Montessori education can be realised in practice in the best way, in a mediocre way, and finally in a very miserable way. . . . The author of this book has made this experience in countless Montessori institutions on four continents, and these range – to name only three – from an institution (in Chicago), where the teachers did not even know who Maria Montessori was and that there is also a Montessori training; to a particularly special

The time and the reason for the spread and establishment may play a role that still needs to be investigated, while the *importance of (geo)political conditions* may be considered certain. While large parts of Central and Northern Europe – considering breaks and turning points such as National Socialism – had more than 100 years to establish a Waldorf system, the committed founding and spreading in many parts of the world began only after more recent political upheavals, such as the fall of the Iron Curtain or the emancipation from colonial structures. Nevertheless, the first two predominantly intra-European waves of founding were also pre-dated by the end of the First and Second World Wars. A third phase in which Waldorf schools began to gain a foothold, particularly in North and South America as well as Oceania, coincided with the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Röh, 2019, p. 205), during which – as Frielingsdorf (2019, p. 309) points out using the German example – the increased interest in Waldorf education also gains plausibility against the backdrop of the simultaneous disillusionment with “the lack of success of the school reform movements” of the time. For their part, the end of the Soviet Union and the opening of the Eastern Bloc marked the starting signal for a fourth wave of expansion into countries previously closed to alternative schools and social concepts for decades (Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 357). Moreover, from the turn of the millennium onward, a continued expansion into and within Asia can be observed (Röh, 2019, p. 206).¹⁷ But these do not just *happen* in isolation from social upheavals and movements in the respective countries. Especially in colonial contexts, it is unsurprising that the spread of alternative schooling is also evident as a consequence of the absolute influence of colonial powers: in former French colonies Freinet education dominates, while in former German colonies Waldorf education prevails, as the case study in Kenya clearly shows. These findings call for a look at the local history of ideas and a historical awareness of how today’s school systems have evolved and the place of Waldorf schools within them. Thus, the sometimes great differences also suggest that the number and distribution of Waldorf schools also depend on the state of the (private) school system in the respective countries. An indication of this is given by

Montessori-Mozart institution (in Santiago de Chile), where I was told that Montessori education could only be practised with Mozart constantly being played; to Primaria Montessori de Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) . . . where I found not only the Montessori material used in all its fine differentiations and nuances, but where above all Montessori’s spirit visibly and tangibly filled both the building and the teachers, and even more so the children, and infused the Montessori method with educational life”.

17 The global dissemination of Waldorf education is raised by its representatives as one of the main objections to accusations of racism inherent in anthroposophy, and in this context it is often raised as an issue in the same breath (cf. among others Leber, 1997a, p. 228; Kullak-Ublick, n.d.). Ansgar Martins (2012, 2023) and Peter Staudenmaier (2014), among others, have pointed out that this argument falls short in light of the complexity and contradictoriness of Steiner’s reflections on root races, cultural epochs and so on.

the different ratios of Waldorf kindergartens to corresponding schools. In some countries, there are exclusively Waldorf schools but no kindergartens. In most countries, both forms of institutionalised Waldorf education can be found, and their developments have gone hand in hand, with the number of kindergartens exceeding that of schools in almost all cases (apart from Australia) (cf. Paull & Hennig, 2020, p. 29). Only very rarely are there officially listed Waldorf kindergartens without corresponding schools – for example, in Vietnam, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan or Fiji.

The aforementioned question about the reasons, triggers, periods and actors of the spread of Waldorf schools is, therefore, not a trivial one, but quite the opposite. It is illuminating for understanding both the Waldorf school movement and the respective school systems in their socio-historical contexts. Here, a research desideratum of considerable extent becomes apparent. In this context, the question of the congruence of anthroposophy, Waldorf education and *religion* also arises. One thing is certain: Waldorf education is hardly represented in countries with a primarily Muslim population and culture. In Egypt (since 1989), Türkiye (since 2009) and Malaysia (since 1997), at least one school is listed; for Türkiye, one kindergarten; for Kyrgyzstan (since 1989), three. Possible reasons for this could be the anthroposophical Christology and the glorification of Christianity as the “culmination of all development” (cf. Zander, 2019, pp. 96, 126) – a possible hurdle for an interreligious or intercultural dialogue at eye level. At the same time, and this can be noted at least for the case studies of Poland, Spain and France, Waldorf and Catholic schools are in a traditionally competitive relationship. As can also be seen from the density of Waldorf schools (Figure 0.1), Waldorf education, analogous to anthroposophy, is in general “much weaker in Roman-Catholic countries . . . than, for example, in Protestant areas of Germany or in Northern Europe”; a development that can be traced even within one country, when, for example, in the early days in France “particularly many [Waldorf] schools were established in Protestant Alsace” (Zander, 2019, p. 92).

The realisation of Waldorf education depends on the political framework, especially at the national level: that its international dissemination is possible at all, let alone to the extent it is, is also due to its character as a supranational, universal idea in connection with its own, non-governmental teacher training, itself a prerequisite for the high teacher mobility within and between countries (Barz, 2013, p. 14). Furthermore, the internet, which allows relatively low-threshold access, may have contributed to the present globalisation of Waldorf education (Stehlik, 2019, p. 186). However, from the beginning until today, “particular individuals or groups, especially and not surprisingly from Germany” (Stehlik, 2019, pp. 90, 358), who published, travelled the world, visited and/or founded interested initiatives are likely of paramount importance; their impact can hardly be overestimated.

What the statistics on the distribution of Waldorf institutions do not tell us, in any case, are qualitative differences in everyday school life, in the

training of Waldorf teachers, in the reputation of the degrees on the labour market, the relationship to local, regional and national particularities (laws, customs, culture, politics) and so on. While it seems possible here to make a first foray into Waldorf education as a worldwide phenomenon, we quickly reach epistemic and epistemological limits.

On the Purpose and Implementation of This Research Project

The ontological problem of the question persists: whether the pedagogical principle of Waldorf education is an attitude rather than a method. This question is also reflected in the theoretical and methodological approaches of the case studies gathered here.¹⁸ And all of this, from the perspective of an inter- or transnational¹⁹ phenomenon. After all, Steiner’s “art of education” follows a universal claim, whose institutional form is, in turn, constituted in dependence on the respective national educational systems and socio-political framework, but at the same time also builds up its own organisations and networks that transcend national and continental borders, such as the *Hague Circle* or *Friends of Waldorf Education*. This results in the momentum of the transnational with its own practices and transfer processes, such as educational journeys and conferences, which go – and must go – *beyond* an addition of national perspectives as well as beyond the singular consideration of supranational organisations (Caruso, 2014, pp. 24–25; Caruso, 2019, p. 569). Against this backdrop, historically aware transfer research is needed,²⁰ which not only looks at the “perspectives, intentions

18 If one assumes that Waldorf education *works* because it emphasises the practice of a certain attitude, this would have various epistemological and research-practical consequences. On the one hand, such a presumed *Waldorf attitude* would plausibly explain the adaptability of this pedagogy on different continents, in different cultures and school systems. While Montessori education demands a very strict and orderly method, the most important requirement for Waldorf teachers would be the adoption of the *right* attitude towards the world and their pupils. On the other hand, this assumption calls for a deeper investigation of the everyday practices of such a diverse Waldorf education the world over, which in turn would have to be examined through qualitative methods, e.g., interviews and ethnographic observations, rather than with questionnaires and statistical evaluations (for a critical review of the empirical turn within Waldorf research, see the contribution by Ansgar Martins in this volume). However, methodologically speaking, researching attitudes is not a trivial undertaking, since an *attitude* (as a social category), in contrast to an *intention* (as a psychological category), often eludes one’s own reflection and verbalisation.

19 Transnationality is used here as an umbrella term “for all those phenomena that go beyond single-society entities (nation, ethnicity, culture) as well as being of a different kind than inter-societal (inter-national, inter-cultural) relations” (Adick, 2005, p. 244), i.e., moving on an intermediate level of spaces and organisations, as it were (Caruso & Waldow, 2021, p. 81).

20 To assume universalisation in Waldorf education in the sense of a “simple diffusion” would be an insufficient and problematic description of the historical process (cf. Caruso & Waldow, 2021, p. 85); nevertheless, there is a need for ongoing reflection on the extent to which

and interests” of the countries giving (lender) or receiving (borrower) ideas but also reconstructs the context of origin firstly, secondly “the de-contextualisation through the operations of selection and import” and thirdly the re-contextualisation in the receiving context²¹ (Caruso & Waldow, 2021, pp. 83–84). It is important to trace the reception process that takes place “in the phase of active reception (externalisation), . . . implementation (re-contextualisation) and . . . indigenisation (internalisation)” (cf. Steiner-Khamsi, 2003, pp. 381–383; cited in Rakhkochkine, 2009, p. 1044). Historically informed educational research conducted in this way can

take into account the diversity of symbolic orders, the different histories and traditions as well as the course and constellations of the transfer and thus to compare specific patterns of meaning and networks of relationships in order to be able to assess the result and effect of the transfer in the first place

(Caruso & Waldow, 2021, p. 83)

and, at the same time, adequately address the problem of methodological nationalism (cf. Caruso, 2019, p. 574).

But what exactly needs to be explored in such a perspective to adequately describe the transnational spread and reception of Waldorf education? One possibility is focussing on *ideas*, i.e., anthroposophy with its specific anthropology, Waldorf education derived from it and their respective interpretations. From the point of view of a (historical-critical) history of ideas, these would become understandable and reconstructable as answers or offers of solutions to problems of the respective contemporary educational system in a specific socio-historical context and against this background in their “radicality or normality” (cf. Zumhof, 2021, pp. 70, 75; Kluchert et al., 2021, p. 24). However, since the pedagogical ideas only become effective when they are applied and communicated, the schools, teacher training colleges and organisations such as the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools*

(possibly as yet unfulfilled) Caruso and Waldow claim to this very universalisation arise from anthroposophy or practices such as licensing and entail a normative standard, which in part also shapes the previous research (perspective).

- 21 This third aspect “of the reception, superimposition, interpretation and, if necessary, modification of the respective models, ideas and techniques” is the primary subject of reception research (Caruso & Waldow, 2021, p. 94). In the context of this book, this aspect is of central importance, as reception is dealt with on several levels – both in a historical comparative national and transnational context, in science and in the (Waldorf) pedagogical public. The existing research desideratum is not specific to Waldorf, as Kluchert and Loeffelmeier (2021, pp. 240–243) point out: “Transnational school history research, on the other hand, has so far concentrated primarily on the forms and paths of the exchange of (school) pedagogical knowledge and reform concepts (cf. e.g. Caruso, 2014), while the highly complex investigation of their ‘adoption’ in the respective (national) state contexts has only rarely taken place”.

and the *Hague Circle* continue to be of great importance for the Waldorf school movement. Organisations and institutions like these play a strong theoretical and methodological role in the previous consideration of international educational research as a whole (cf. Fuchs & Schriewer, 2007; Adick, 2012). If one follows Dhondt et al. (2015, p. 641), this view is also justified for Waldorf education insofar as there is – as can be seen in the example of the naming – a “supervision”²² of Waldorf initiatives by anthroposophical organisations that have made the steering of global dissemination one of their tasks. Therefore, the paths of Waldorf educational ideas that manifest themselves here and there in schools and find more far-reaching organisational forms are certainly not entirely random. Nevertheless, van Schie (2020, pp. 70–71), in his reference to the ethnographer Anna Tsing, agreed that Waldorf education as a European alternative education in today’s Philippines is “a place of unusual international encounters” and that the ethnographic view of global connections is worthwhile, as it reveals “concrete trajectories of globalizing projects in so-called zones of awkward engagement”, i.e., “real encounters, networks, and actions”, “in order to understand global connections” and to highlight the “specificity of cases in which coincidental events and personal efforts and actions play decisive roles”. Although the respective framework conditions and “the prevailing zeitgeist” (Stehlik, 2019, p. 90) play their part in whether pedagogical ideas take root in a specific place, it is the actors who carry them and translate them into actions – and should, therefore, also be considered methodologically (Mietzner, 2021, p. 128). In the case of Waldorf education, the actors are not only teachers but also parents and pupils as constitutive parts of the school community, anthroposophists from other fields of practice and all those who refer to them in their actions and symbolic orders. Such cultural studies or a cultural history approach starts with the practices of those who refer to Waldorf education in their actions and thus reproduce it, but in a certain way also constitute it in the first place. As Ruhi Thyson (2021, p. 82), among others, puts it, even with a (largely) uniform curriculum, as envisaged by the Waldorf school, there are “variations on formal and enacted curricula in Steiner/Waldorf schools” and an overall diversity in practices, which, like much else, requires closer examination and further research (cf. Dhondt et al., 2015, p. 648).

Since the data and research situation is unfortunately so disparate and not very meaningful on a global scale, we have sought the inside insights of

22 This supervision, the granting of rights to the name and close links with anthroposophical organisations and other fields of practice are, in addition to the widespread dissemination of Waldorf education, also the reason why a “demythologisation of the ideas and figure of Steiner”, an “unbiased history” is hardly possible, as this always leads to a polarisation into “adherents or critics” (Dhondt et al., 2015, p. 641).

knowledgeable colleagues who, from their respective expertise,²³ enable an exploratory approach to commonalities and differences in the *discourses* and *reputation of* Waldorf education a) in the *public sphere* and b) in *academic contexts*. At the centre of our interest is the question of whether Waldorf education is not only practised differently in different parts of the world but also perceived, discussed and (de)legitimised. It can be assumed that in any case, there is a difference between the two discourses which needs to be elicited in detail and in the mode and claim of the non-affirmative: Not Waldorf education from Steiner's pen, not the Waldorf educational principles of the *Hague Circle* or others are taken as the starting point, but the other way around, what emerges between anthroposophical institutions and the public, practitioners and consumers as Waldorf education is distilled.

At least the public discourse on Waldorf education in various countries is becoming more dynamic and critical. There are some indications of this, including several scandals in recent years. For example, in 2010, the book *Det de ikke forteller oss* [What they don't tell us] upset parts of Norwegian society, while in the following years in France, the *Causa Grégoire Perra* and, more recently, *Charlie Hebdo* drew attention to Waldorf school practices. In 2019, the UK *Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills* (Ofsted) presented devastating evaluation results of three Waldorf schools,²⁴ and in the heyday of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, systematic refusal to vaccinate in German Waldorf schools became a topic.²⁵

The question arises whether and how such increased attention in *public discourse* has an effect on the practice of Waldorf schools, on the training of teachers and on *academic discourse*. Conversely, the question arises as to what extent such an academic Waldorf discourse is heard in public perception and, in turn, has an effect on Waldorf practice and whether and to what extent there are shifts in the meaning of what constitutes Waldorf education. In order to ensure the commensurability of the individual chapters with one

23 The authors cover a wide spectrum of closeness and distance to Waldorf education – some have been to a Waldorf school themselves, have sent their children to such a kindergarten or are doing research at a university or college with a proven closeness to Waldorf education and anthroposophy, while for others the opposite is true. The decisive factor for our inclusion in the volume was neither the one nor the other, but the mode of relating to one's own subject and the questions posed to it. In our view, the patterns that emerge in the analyses and are synthesised in the epilogue, despite or precisely because of this multi-perspectivity and multi-layeredness, thus acquire their special content.

24 Since the United Kingdom unfortunately does not appear as a case study in these volumes, reference is made here to a corresponding article in the *Guardian* from Sally Weale (2019, January 17).

25 For those who would like to follow the critical discourse on Waldorf institutions in an international context, the *Waldorf Critics* mailing list is highly recommended: <https://groups.io/g/waldorf-critics>.

Table 0.2 Guiding questions for the individual case studies.

- (How) is Waldorf education perceived and discussed a) in the public and b) in academia? Is it a concept that is accepted/respected/canonised? Is it part of (public) teacher training or vocational training?
- What are the differences and similarities between “public” and “academic” discourses? Are there influences between the two?
- What is the self-image of Waldorf educators with regard to academia? Is there a tendency towards segregation or integration?
- What is the relationship between the public discussion and the success/spread of Waldorf education?
- What platforms and forums (blogs, journals, publishers) are there for discussions? Are certain media or actors/authors particularly active or visible?
- To what extent is Waldorf education associated a) with anthroposophy and b) with Rudolf Steiner? Are there attempts of detachment to be noticed (instead: replacement of topoi from developmental psychology, philosophy, theology)?
- Is Waldorf education primarily perceived as a method, worldview or something else (an alternative choice to the mainstream)? Are there differences between self-perception and perception by others?
- Are certain practices (educational, scholastic, instructional) perceived as representative of Waldorf education? Do these stand out from the image of “typical reform education”?
- Is Waldorf education primarily associated with school, elementary education or communal living (Camphill)?
- Regarding the temporal dimension: Has the image or perception changed in the last years/decades? Have institutions, organisations and practices changed?
- Are there interrelations between Waldorf education and the other anthroposophical fields of practice, medicine and agriculture?

another and to defend the project against the suspicion of eclecticism without at the same time imposing too tight a research-practical corset on the respective authors, we have provided the contributors with a series of guiding questions that, regardless of the available data corpus and the collection method, allow sufficient scientific and authorial freedom to conduct and formulate the unique case studies in each field. In the interest of transparency, we feel it is important to present them here (Table 0.2).

The result is presented in the two volumes at hand with 16 case studies from 14 countries. It is a mixture that could hardly be more colourful in terms of geographical distribution and methodological approaches, with a relative emphasis on the German-speaking region, in line with the statistical distribution mentioned previously and the hotspots of Waldorf research. The contributions as a whole are based on a chronological order that follows the founding of the first Waldorf school in its respective country. The “Early Endeavours of Expansion” (1919–1955) are thus presented in the first volume and the “Recent Developments the World Over” (1987–2010) in the second.

Self-evidently, there are gaps in such a project, which – today almost atavistically – has developed from the bottom up without any third-party

funding or outside pressure, with an acquisition phase of almost two years involving a lot of legwork and thus requiring patience on the part of the contributors. For example, contributions on the USA and Canada, Denmark and Sweden, Taiwan, Flanders/Belgium, Greece, Bulgaria and South Africa have sadly disappeared in the process, and insights into Central and Latin American practices and discourses of Waldorf education are also missing. The same is true for Oceania, the United Kingdom, and many other countries or regions. In this regard, it should be noted that the concept is, in principle, open to the future through the guiding questions outlined in Table 0.2, thus allowing for and calling for a potential expansion to a third volume, mindful of the danger of breaking with the aforementioned chronological order. And yet, as much manoeuvring criticism may be allowed, 14 out of 75 countries are not too bad a quota for such a first advance. In the epilogue concluding the second volume, we make an attempt to systematise the findings from an international-comparative point of view in the synopsis – including already published studies – and to discuss further research gaps and ideas. These considerations, too, may be read less as a conclusion than as inspiration for further research.

The fact that these first two volumes were able to come into being at all is due to many people who, although they do not appear on the book covers, deserve our heartfelt thanks for their expertise and commitment. First and foremost, Peter Staudenmaier (*Marquette University*), a distinguished Waldorf researcher, bestows dignity and context to this volume through his foreword. We would also like to thank Nina Buzengeiger, Fiona Hollmann and Michael Olbrich (all of them *FernUniversität in Hagen*) as well as Tina and Elisabeth Sanders, Moritz Müller, Lukas Leslie and Andreas Halvorsen Lødemel (*Universitetet i Tromsø*) for their efforts in reviewing the chapter manuscripts, research work and much more. In addition, we would like to thank AnnaMary Goodall of *Routledge*, who, with great commitment and even greater kindness, made our book project possible and advanced it as Commissioning Editor. Last but not least, we would like to thank the 25 contributors to these two volumes for embarking on this project of uncertain outcome and for contributing all the more resolutely, with great emphasis and verve, despite their consuming day jobs and numerous other commitments.

Contrary to the custom of such anthologies, we have decided to omit the short abstracts of the individual chapters that follow at this point, since we do not want to presume to be able to express the expertise of the respective country studies gathered here even better or more precisely in text. In this sense, we would like to conclude by expressing our hope that with these two volumes, we have created an impulse for international comparative Waldorf research.

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1 The Educational Discourse on Waldorf Education in Germany

Heiner Ullrich

Overture

The home country of Waldorf education is still Germany. And it is also in this country that the scientific examination of Rudolf Steiner's pedagogy began. As is well known, the first Waldorf school was opened by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) in 1919 as a factory school for the children of workers at the *Waldorf Astoria* cigar and cigarette factory in Stuttgart. In 1926, the Waldorfian Elisabeth Grunelius founded the first Waldorf kindergarten at this school. From 1927 onward, the Stuttgart mother school offered its own two-year “teacher training courses”, by attending which public school teachers could train as Waldorf teachers. By the time Hitler came to power in 1933, a further eight Waldorf schools had been established in the Weimar Republic, although they had to cease their work again between 1936 and 1941 under the pressure of the Nazi dictatorship.

Impressive Practice, Dubious Theory – the Reception Pattern That Is Still Fundamental Today

While Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy has always been met mainly with reserve or incomprehension outside his student body or has provoked criticism and polemics (cf. Ullrich, 1991, pp. 204–212), this does not apply in the same way to the Waldorf school inspired by him. Even the first expert visitors to the Stuttgart mother school are taken with its practice, although they are hostile to Rudolf Steiner's teachings. With this viewpoint, two leading school reformers of the Weimar period, who belonged to the socialist-oriented *Bund Entschiedener Schulreformer* [Association of Decisive School Reformers], created as early as 1923, the basic attitude of reform education sympathising with the Waldorf school, which determined the reception of the Waldorf school in educational discourse among numerous experts from this first phase to the present day. Fritz Karsen portrays the Waldorf school in his overview of the German “experimental schools of the present day” and reports on his visit to the Stuttgart school:

If I move on from the lessons, which despite the profound theory showed many shortcomings, to the overall impression left by the school, I can

only say that such a uniform, warm, happy atmosphere seemed to permeate the whole school and every individual that even the casual visitor was immediately gripped by it. It is a great deal, if one can say that about a school.

(Karsen, 1923, p. 99)¹

And for Karl Wilker, this impressive pedagogical atmosphere arises from the shared ethos of the teaching staff:

One can admire and acknowledge the Waldorf school a hundred times over as a pedagogical deed. But one will never speak out in favour of anthroposophy. It does not constitute the essence of this school; it is constituted by the personality value of the people in it.

(Wilker, 1923, p. 134)

Even Karl Hövels, in his dissertation otherwise characterised by strong polemics against anthroposophy, was unable to overlook the pedagogical atmosphere of respect and trust towards the pupils at the (Cologne) Waldorf school. He explains the high motivation of the teachers and their commonality from their missionary zeal. For

this school is – even if hidden – a worldview school in the purest form. The teachers work all the more devotedly towards the realisation of their worldview ideal out of conviction and perhaps precisely because of the hidden goal they are striving for.

(Hövels, 1926, p. 67)

With this critical view of the ideological character of Waldorf education, Hövels articulates the rather critical-ideological basic attitude that still determines the other side in the controversy surrounding Waldorf schools today.

The practice of Waldorf schools has impressed people of the most diverse world views – even Alfred Bäumler, the leading educational ideologist of the National Socialist dictatorship. In his 1937 statement on Waldorf schools, he noted that here – entirely in the spirit of National Socialism (!) – the intellectualism of the Enlightenment was being overcome for the first time in the German school system.

In view of the great advantages of Waldorf education, it should be considered whether it would be possible to set up experimental state schools based on a modified Waldorf curriculum. The establishment of

¹ This and all other quotations are originally written in German and, like the contribution as a whole, have been translated by the editors. Any misleading and/or ambiguous wording is therefore the sole responsibility of the publishers and not the author.

such experimental schools, for which the name Goethe Schools would be appropriate, could only take place with the collaboration of tried and tested teachers from the old Waldorf schools.

(Bäumler, quoted in Leschinsky, 1983, pp. 282–283)

The Educational-Pragmatic Interest in Waldorf Education

Shortly after the end of the war in 1945, six Waldorf schools were again re-founded in liberated Germany, and by the early 1950s, their number had risen to 22 in the young Federal Republic. In parallel with them, 11 Waldorf kindergartens and 10 Waldorf special schools were established in their vicinity. Because of the lack of suitable teachers to set up more schools, the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools* imposed a freeze on the founding of new schools from 1951 to 1968. During this period, the Steiner schools were hardly noticed by the general public interested in education. They had established themselves, as they were unnoticed, in a niche of the school system and lived there in splendid isolation.

For this reason, it is not surprising that the pedagogy of the time, which was largely based on the humanistic tradition, showed little interest in Waldorf education (cf. Frielingsdorf, 2019, pp. 254–255). In the few contributions from the field of academic education, the predominantly positive reformist reception pattern is repeated and differentiated in this second phase: appreciation of the educational merits of the Waldorf school and restraint towards the intellectual dogmatism of the underlying worldview. Theodor Wilhelm (1959) mentions the Waldorf school briefly but appreciatively in his *Pädagogik der Gegenwart* [Pedagogy of the Present] and places it – alongside the *Landerziehungsheimen* [German rural boarding school movement], the *Arbeitsschulen* [Working Schools] and Jenaplan Schools, the art education movement and Montessori education – in the main currents of *Reformpädagogik*² then. The journal articles by Hans Scheuerl (1957) and Ingeborg Maschmann (1959) follow this trail of evaluation. Scheuerl identifies the unmistakable strengths of Waldorf schools as

the cultivation of inner gathering, the educational cultivation of the artistic and practical spheres, the teaching of Epochs, the self-administration of the colleges, the personal relationship between school and school community, and in all this, the love of the child and a high pedagogical ethos.

(Scheuerl, 1957, p. 80)

2 In translating the chapter, we [MFB; AKH] deliberately chose to retain the term *Reformpädagogik*, since Ullrich refers to the perception of Waldorf education in the context of a specifically German-speaking tradition of schooling. In our introduction to this anthology, we elaborate on the historical and conceptual difference (however small it may be) between *Reformpädagogik*, progressive education, and *éducation nouvelle*.

Ingeborg Maschmann, who spent a week at a Waldorf school in 1958, concluded that the school was “ordered” by its unity and its own tradition, that the Waldorf teacher understood his work as a mission to save and that the Waldorf school was “like an educational province” (cf. Maschmann, 1959, p. 476). Since the problems of the anthroposophical worldview were largely ignored in the rather marginal educational discourse of the time, an overall positive image of the Waldorf school emerged. Criticism, on the other hand, is increasingly levelled at the fact that Waldorf teachers – for the sake of the uniform order and unity of their pedagogical conception – swear themselves more to their master like an order that closes itself off to the outside world, instead of entering into an open discussion of school pedagogy and didactics.

In a more detailed study, Heinz Kloss (1955) looks at the role that Waldorf schools can play in the reorganisation of the West German school system. After outlining the similarities between *Reformpädagogik* and Waldorf education and the “Waldorf peculiarities without a Reform educational counterpart”, he concludes that “Waldorf education is neither a side arm of Reform education, nor a sectarian remote still water, but that it already signifies the third major mainstream in education today” (Kloss, 1955, p. 116). In order to clarify this role as a “third force”, Kloss deliberately presents “a kind of ideal picture” of the Waldorf school on which its special merits are elaborated. To this end, Kloss deals only with its “external phenomena”, not with its theoretical foundations. For Kloss, the peculiar strengths of Waldorf education lie in the artistic and religious permeation of teaching and school life. Not only does the number of artistic subjects and activities exceed what is otherwise customary, but the artistic “rhythmically” permeates the entire teaching and education. And “the primordial religious experiences of a not yet intellectualised humanity are sunk deeply into the children’s minds, especially in the lower school” (Kloss, 1955, p. 57). Kloss contrasts *Reformpädagogik* as a “pedagogy of closeness to life” with Waldorf education as a “pedagogy of the world horizon”, which places the pupil in an overarching cosmic context. For Kloss, this cosmic horizon is not formed by the anthroposophical worldview in Waldorf school lessons but by a “Goethean worldview” which “can be united with the religious beliefs of the denominations incomparably better than the conclusions of the materialistic worldview” (Kloss, 1955, p. 102).

Helmut Schrey (1968) takes a similarly “pragmatic” – and sympathetic – approach to Waldorf education as Kloss; for in his monograph, he would like to “merely ask . . . whether some of the conclusions arising from Steiner’s thinking and teachings are not, after all, useful from an educational point of view and – above all – to be welcomed as regulative” (Schrey, 1968, p. 94). For Schrey, what – scientifically speaking – grows out of the dubious can very well prove to be effective and meaningful in pedagogical practice. He is therefore concerned with “a kind of translation of Steiner’s pedagogical teachings into the un-anthroposophical” (Schrey, 1968, p. 8). According to Schrey, the three most important pedagogical “regulatives” that public school teachers

can read from the Waldorf schools and translate into their practice concern the organisation of the teacher-pupil relationship, the arrangement of educational content and the grading of the educational course.

In the encounter with the child, the Waldorf teacher sees himself as standing at the centre of an ordered and transparent cosmos, which is meaningfully ordered in terms of space, time and degrees of reality, and, consequently, in turn, meaningfully rearranged in the learning process.

(Schrey, 1968, p. 43)

Accordingly, at the level of the curriculum, all subject lessons in the Waldorf school are oriented towards an overarching uniform frame of reference, the core of which is formed by the narrative materials of the Epoch lessons. And these, in turn, are related back to developmental teaching that “after all, has numerous points of contact with the stage teachings of scientific psychology” (Schrey, 1968, p. 108). In discussion with Waldorf education, teachers at mainstream schools can, therefore, learn, among other things, that the demands of the individual subjects alone must not set the standards for teaching. In return, Schrey suggests that Waldorf teachers revise their categorical rejection of textbooks and media in line with the times.

Three decades later and in the context of a more intensive educational reception of Waldorf education, Werner E. Spies (1985) continues the school’s pedagogical-pragmatic discourse. On the basis of his personal familiarity with the *Hibernia School* in Herne, a Waldorf school with both a general and vocational upper school, he arrives at an almost unreservedly positive characterisation of the Waldorf school as a “pedagogical contrast programme” to the mainstream school with a “meaningful practice”. With this focus on practice, Spies implicitly follows the pattern of reception of *Reformpädagogik*, neglecting the ideological foundations. He identifies the educational principle of “skill development and the methodological principles of continuity, activity, sensuality, relatedness, social commitment” as the foundations of the Waldorf school’s “counter-programme” (Spies, 1985, p. 212). Skill development means selecting teaching materials so that they evoke learning from the head, heart and hand; continuity means the ritual structuring of time and the grouping of teaching processes into Epochs; activity is realised in a wide range of practical and creative work; sensuality means the cultivation of all the senses in lessons and school life through artistic and craft design, gardening and the exploration of the tangible environment; relatedness expresses the fact that the educational programme of the Waldorf school is oriented towards the past and future of the individual pupil as well as towards that of the culture. Spies sees the main reason for the educational effectiveness of the “counter-programme” of the Waldorf school in the fact that “order and coherence, which are endangered in the surreal whirl of our public life, are established within the school” (Spies, 1985).

Since then, the pragmatic reception of *Reformpädagogik* has been continued by a group of educational scientists working in the field of school education, who have conducted a dialogue over several years with leading teacher educators from Waldorf education. They are not primarily concerned with testing the anthropological theory of Waldorf teachers or their educational conception of their scientific truth. Rather, they want to work out the practical contribution of Waldorf education to school and teaching development in public schools as a whole. The results of this dialogue are available to the professional public in several thematically accentuated anthologies (cf. Bohnsack & Kranich, 1994; Bohnsack & Leber, 1996; Buck & Kranich, 1995). The first fascination of Waldorf schools is seen in their consistent realisation of school autonomy, above all in legal-administrative, managerial and educational terms. Among the independent schools in Germany today, Waldorf schools are the ones which, along with the independent alternative schools, make the most extensive use of the educational freedom granted by the constitution. Because of their deliberate difference, they clash with most of the regulations to which schools with state-recognised certificates and degrees are subject. As “freely practising” employees of the school association within the framework of collegial school management, Waldorf teachers are not subject to any official professional and service supervision; they are quasi co-entrepreneurs of their school. Because of their greater administrative and economic independence, Waldorf schools find it easier to develop an individually distinctive school profile. And the parents, through their conscious choice of school and their additional financial commitment, also have a justified interest in ensuring the educational quality of the school. Their desire for participation and co-design is stronger here than in most mainstream schools.

Secondly, the school architecture of Waldorf schools has a special, stimulating effect on the further development of a school culture. Christian Rittelmeyer (1994) assumes – following in the footsteps of Waldorf educators – that school buildings have a gestural or gesturing effect and can have a friendly, intrusive, or dismissive relationship with pupils and teachers. In empirical-phenomenological studies, he investigated the experience of school building forms, in particular, their effect on the sense of balance and the sense of self-movement as well as on the circulation, respiration and digestion of the observer. In the experience of the school building, pupils sense the social esteem in which they are held and the image of education that has been created. According to Rittelmeyer, there is much to be learned from Waldorf school architecture for school construction. According to the principle of metamorphosis, there is no monotony of window fronts, no strictly cubic room shapes, no additive juxtaposition of building elements, no serial façade designs, and no strict symmetries. In other words, the static is contrasted with the constantly evolving. As a rule, this creates – according to the opinion of the pupils interviewed – the impression of richness of stimulation, of liveliness.

Thirdly, the educational scientists pay particular attention to the wide range of educational opportunities offered by the Waldorf schools, especially practical learning. This is because Waldorf education encompasses a highly differentiated concept of artistic and manual learning. Practical education leads from the construction play of the small child to handicrafts and horticulture to handicraft production in adolescence. It is closely related to the artistic activities of painting, drawing, music-making, recitation and eurythmy. Alongside the linguistic-intellectual acquisition of the world and the artistic-expressive, hands-on practical activity is a significant medium of self-realisation, especially for today's adolescents, in whose world first-hand experience is disappearing more and more. The curriculum of the hand of Waldorf schools can put a stop to the tendency towards a de-sensualisation of learning and the de-realisation of mental work, which, as a result of a verbalistic and scientific one-sidedness of education, is increasingly determining learning in mainstream schools.

Fourthly, the genetic art of teaching in Waldorf schools, especially in science lessons, is highly stimulating. One of the reasons why science lessons at mainstream schools are so unacceptable today is that they cut off the pupils' experience of nature in their everyday lives and create feelings of alienation towards natural processes. It "divides" the students, loosens their connection to the world and weakens their interest in phenomena (cf. Buck, 1994). If, on the other hand, the aim is an experience-saturated, self-executed comprehension, then the connections must be made tangible for the pupils. "Rooting" and "original understanding" (Wagenschein, 1970a, 1970b) are possible when teachers ensure that the reality that can be experienced with the senses becomes present and that different attentions and perspectives can come into play. With their "Goetheanist" art of teaching, Waldorf didacticians question the monopoly of experimental, quantifying and model-like abstracting knowledge acquisition and try to rehabilitate other, namely practical and "physiognomic-portrait" forms of knowledge about nature in order to secure the learners' connection to the world.

A fifth zone of approach by educational scientists to Waldorf education is the search for a practice-guiding teacher knowledge arising from the critique of the previous form of scientificisation of teacher training. The specialised, subject-neutral way in which scientific knowledge is taught to future teachers at universities all too easily leads to a disappearance of reality: the subject, who actually produced the scientific questioning and knowledge through his or her amazement and reflection, no longer appears at all in the results- and expert-fixed knowledge of the subject-specific teaching. With the examination-related accumulation of specialised knowledge, the connection to reality and the subjective interest in the subject disappear. Rumpf and Kranich see ways in Waldorf teacher training that lead to avoiding this kind of scientific half-education (cf. Rumpf & Kranich, 2000). Essential here is the anthropological question of the forms of knowledge which do not rashly reduce the reference to reality but intensify and expand it for the purpose of personality formation. Phenomena

and subject-sensitive forms of knowledge, with their closer relationship to the subject matter, are more likely to form an interest in science than the direct orientation towards the front of single-scientific research.

The sixth and, so far, most open chapter in the educational discourse with Waldorf teachers concerns social learning, the school practice of education for sociality. In view of new forms of social apathy, increasing readiness for aggression and exclusion of strangers, general education schools are also called upon to reflect on and cultivate the relationship of learners and teachers to each other. Waldorf teachers are of the opinion that a “guiding” teacher personality is necessary for the pupils of a class until the beginning of their adolescence and that this function of a “natural authority” and “identification figure” can certainly still be fulfilled by an all-round class teacher today. The adolescent process of detachment and emancipation is thus to be preceded by a close bond with a significant other in school as well. On the other hand, educationalists sympathetic to Waldorf education, such as Horst Rumpf, emphasise that the driving force of teaching should not be the autocracy of the class teacher, which in Waldorf schools pushes for succession, but the authority of the subject matter, which challenges everyone to do their own thinking and to engage in clarifying discussion. Fritz Bohnsack (1996), in dialogue with Waldorf educators, pleads for a partnership rather than an authoritative shaping of the teacher-pupil relationship even at primary school age. In contrast to the topics of school autonomy, school architecture, practical learning and the genetic art of teaching, the discussion between Waldorf teachers and educational scientists about social learning ends in fundamental differences and critical queries about Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogy. The initially fruitful dialogue here, it seems, finally becomes an irreconcilable controversy because, for example, the unquestioning claim to authority of the class teacher and the derivation of the norms and forms of educational action from apparently universally determined age phases (“septennial”) unintentionally make the ideological foundations themselves the subject of discussion. Even those educationalists who are so open to Waldorf education’s reform pedagogy find themselves confronted with the big question at this point: What do you think of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy? Without anthroposophy, one cannot understand the Waldorf school; its organisation, didactics and methodology are profoundly determined by it. Even the characteristics of the school and learning culture of the Waldorf school, which have so far been accentuated as *Reformpädagogik*, only receive their authentic form and value in the light of the anthroposophical worldview.

Analysis and Critique of the Ideological Foundations of Waldorf Education

After the freeze on the founding of new Waldorf schools was lifted, a new phase in the development of the German Waldorf school movement began, marked by rapid growth in size, a new grassroots-oriented founding pattern

and the establishment of a completely independent seminar-based teacher training programme. Between 1969 and 1990, the number of Waldorf schools in Germany rose from 28 to 140. The new Waldorf schools are no longer founded by patrons from the anthroposophical scene but by committed parents' initiatives that are critical of the state school. And since 1973, seminars for Waldorf education have been springing up one after the other all over Germany, where teachers for Waldorf schools are trained either as undergraduates or part-time without first having to attend state universities.

Parallel to this unprecedented wave of expansion of new Waldorf schools and kindergartens, a third phase of academic pedagogy's engagement with Waldorf education began, which was now primarily directed at analysing and criticising its concept of man and its concept of education. Even before this third phase began, Siegfried Oppolzer (1959) was the first educationalist to deal thoroughly with the theoretical foundations of Waldorf education. In his dissertation, he analysed, in particular, Rudolf Steiner's way of knowing, his study of man and his conception of education from the perspective of the history of ideas. Including Steiner's basic writings and lectures, he "reveals and deals with the reciprocal relationship between anthropology and pedagogy in Steiner's work on the basis of intellectual history, i.e., in their embedding in the time of their historical origin and in their relationship to spiritual tradition" (Oppolzer, 1959, p. 3). With his historical-hermeneutical approach, Oppolzer attempts to refrain from apologetics as well as criticism. He leaves it to others to answer the question of the validity of the anthroposophical study of man and the topicality of Steiner's pedagogy.

Oppolzer distinguishes two different types of cognition in Rudolf Steiner's thinking: the phenomenological and the theosophical.

The former ties in with Goethe's "physiognomic method". It remains in the realm of the sensually perceptible and, on the premise of the original unity of "inside" and "outside", of essence and appearance . . . it arrives at a phenomenological way of looking at the human being. The theosophical-anthroposophical doctrine of knowledge does not formally abandon the ontological-epistemological position of "objective idealism" and also has a formal link in the concept of "intuition", but the world of ideas becomes the divine world, which is filled with spiritual entities or "hierarchies". . . . This way of knowing leads to statements about the essence of man which go beyond the traditional understanding of scientificity and, in their derivation, lack generality and the necessity of comprehension and, therefore, lack binding control.
(Oppolzer, 1959, pp. 55–56)

Rudolf Steiner's study of the human being also does not have uniform features in its central concepts of "nature", "development" and "individuality". Predominant in this "multiplicity" is the influence of romantic natural philosophy with its organological understanding of the concept of nature and

development and the theosophical influence with its spiritual understanding of the concept of individuality. The human being is grasped

as a body-soul-spirit entity in the context of cosmos and nature, on the one hand following the Gnostic and theosophical tradition, as the lowest member of a spiritual-divine hierarchy, which is in a process of cosmic ascent, and on the other hand, following the Romantic philosophy of nature, as the epitome of a natural order built up in stages. In this syncretic system, man appears as an absolutely “established” being. The expression of this is the rigid schematism of countless divisions in Steiner’s anthropology.

(Oppolzer, 1959, p. 162)

Steiner’s twofold starting point from the nature of the human being also leads him to a twofold dimensioning of the educational task: on the one hand, organologically as an all-round development of strength and, on the other hand, spiritually as an uplifting into the world of the spiritual. In the first dimension, Waldorf education follows in the footsteps of the New Humanist educational tradition; in the second, it takes a critical and religious stand against the materialism of our age. In the first dimension, Waldorf teachers see themselves as artistic personalities who, through their example, develop the pupil’s strengths in an all-round and developmentally rhythmic way; in the second dimension, they see themselves as soul leaders who, through their faithful devotion to their highly conceived task awaken a spiritual worldview in the adolescent.

Oppolzer ends his careful and circumspect study of the theoretical foundations of Waldorf education with the sober but ultimately pejorative statement: “Steiner does not introduce a new thought – this is the concluding result of the present interpretation – into the history of education” (Oppolzer, 1959, p. 163).

In his detailed ideology-critical monograph, Klaus Prange (2000) addresses the non-scientific dogmatism and universal claim to the validity of Steiner’s anthroposophical worldview and exposes the practice of Waldorf education as “education to anthroposophy”. He begins his argument by pointing out the numerous inner contradictions in Steiner’s intellectual career, which are still overlooked by his biographers today, and then attempts to dismantle anthroposophy’s claim to originality by exposing Steiner’s many unacknowledged intellectual adoptions:

This is true of the story psychology found in the theosophical writings of Helena Blavatsky; it is equally true of his doctrine of the world-ages, and it is especially true of those innovations which he attributes to Waldorf education. It will be seen to what extent Steiner was a student of Austrian Herbartianism. From it, he borrows the principle of a curriculum appropriate to the cultural levels, the phase theory of teaching and the class teacher principle without ever making any reference to the sources and borrowings.

(Prange, 2000, p. 55)

Like his presumed instigator Gustav Adolf Lindner (1828–1887), Steiner assumes that a uniform attitude should be brought to all school learning from a supreme educational goal in the school organisation and methods, as well as in the selection and sequence of educational content. “Seen in this light, Waldorf education in its structure and formal understanding of education and teaching is a variant of Herbartianism, however original and novel it may pretend to be” (Prange, 2000, p. 84). However, the guiding ideas for the Waldorf school’s *Gesinnungsunterricht* [aspiration-based schooling] are no longer provided by ethics and psychology but solely by anthroposophy.

And, in this respect, it is quite erroneous if the opinion exists that in the Waldorf school, learning and the themes of learning arise from the child; they arise from the view of the child, and this is anthroposophical down to the detail of the presentation of legends or biographies, minerals or flowers, animals or stories. Seen in this light, anthroposophy is educated in the Waldorf school, and all the more sustainably, because it is not “taught” directly and controllably, but instilled, as it were. The curriculum controls the learning, and the anthroposophical worldview [controls] the curriculum.

(Prange, 2000, p. 117)

The central role is played by the class teacher’s claim to authority: “There is hardly a school that is teacher-oriented in the same compelling way and cannot be different than the Waldorf school” (Prange, 2000, p. 147).

It is remarkable that Klaus Prange, despite his profound criticism of the anti-modernism and syncretism of Steiner’s teachings and the ideologically minded teaching of the Waldorf schools – like other critics of the foundations of Waldorf education – cannot avoid attesting to the practice of Waldorf schools that it “contains memories of conventional and forgotten truths (that) educational thinking and action cannot abandon without disadvantage” (Prange, 2000, p. 156). By this, he means, among other things, the emphasis on learning by imitation in the early school years, the indispensability of “sensory-aesthetic cultivation”, attention to the historical and genetic dimension in the curriculum and the conscious assumption of pedagogical responsibility by the teaching staff.

As a representative of a philosophical approach schooled in Kant’s epistemological critique, Wolfgang Schneider (1991), in analysing the “human image of Waldorf education”, concludes that even the pre-theosophical Steiner, in justifying his epistemology, falls back on a pre-critical and naïve realist position due to a fundamental psychologistic misunderstanding of the cognitive boundaries drawn by Kant. By transfiguring thinking into a supposedly objective mirror of being, Steiner grants man, without philosophical proof, an ultimately unlimited possibility of cognition with which he can intellectually grasp the supra-historical truths or eternal ideas. The critical question of the limits of cognition given by the human constitution, which are set with the form of sensual perception

and the categories of understanding, is not accepted by Steiner, nor is the question of the historicity of human self-understanding. Whereas Kant's analysis of the conditions of human cognition compellingly proves the impossibility of scientific proof of God, Steiner's premise that thinking can, in principle, behold the absolute in the form of cognition of essence results in the human understanding itself having to be of divine essence. Only those who share this rationally unprovable metaphysical premise will not see in Steiner's world of thought any principled infringement of philosophical reflection and all the more likely to believe Steiner's insights, gained on the theosophical path of training, into the supersensible forces of being and the effects of destiny in the higher worlds. A boundless epistemology must also lead to a boundless concept of human existence. This is already evident in Steiner's dualistic conception of man, in which he portrays the finite physical nature of the individual as the bearer of an eternal, infinite soul-spiritual entity that reincarnates itself again and again. In his early philosophical writings, Steiner outlines the ethics of anthroposophy as "ethical individualism", i.e., as the action of an individual who is certain of himself and who seeks to find the source of his morality in the pure thinking of the world as a whole. In Steiner's main theosophical work, there is the ethics of the human being committed to or subjected to karma, who unites with the world plan or cosmic evolution on the highest level of cognition. As in his epistemology and anthropology, Steiner's belief in the ideality and divinity of the human being revealed in all individuality also fundamentally determines his ethical thinking – in different forms in his early work and in his main work. Only when the individual, through moral intuition, aligns his or her actions with the eternal order of the world of ideas can there be, for the early Steiner, the doing of the good. However, this cannot be described as moral action in the strict sense, which arises from the freedom of the subject; rather, it is the action of an individual whose will necessarily corresponds to the world of ideas seen. What Steiner understands by "freedom" turns out to be, strictly speaking, being determined by the world of ideas. Steiner later tries to rethink the concepts of freedom and responsibility on the basis of the theosophical teachings of reincarnation and fate (karma), in the light of which the moral action of the individual no longer appears to be bound only to his present existence, but already determined by previous lives on earth. He starts from the premise that the human being at birth is the union of an eternal spiritual being with a finite physical body and that death only means the end of the latter. For the spiritual "I", death does not represent a limit but only an interruption of its process of formation, which continues in the following incarnations. Through the "law of fate" (karma), the deeds of the previous life have a determining effect on the actions in the future existence. According to Steiner, man lives in two times: the finite lifetime available to him and the eternal overtime between embodiments that is unavailable to him. The specificity of the historical, the uniqueness of existence, to which finitude fundamentally belongs, is here delimited or dissolved. Strictly speaking, man cannot determine himself here and now because his actions cannot have any direct repercussions on him due to his being caught

up in past and future karma. He is “free” only to the extent that he has acquired knowledge of the world context in which he stands. If man only has the choice of fulfilling the laws of the world plan given to him or having them fulfilled against his will, then the difference between freedom and necessity disappears; moral self-determination does not seem possible within this supra-individual causal nexus. As in his early work, the founder of anthroposophy also determines the human being without a real limit of knowledge, without a real limit of his existence and without a real limit of being determined by the law of fate (cf. Schneider, 1991, pp. 33–34).

In his analysis of the anthropological foundations of Waldorf education, especially Rudolf Steiner’s developmental and temperamental teachings, Heiner Ullrich (1991) does not proceed philosophically-systematically but rather reconstructs the history of ideas. According to this, Rudolf Steiner did not conceive his teaching of the gradual “births” or metamorphoses of the (young) human being at intervals of seven years in discourse with contemporary developmental psychology; rather, with this doctrine of seven years, he reverts to the archaic scheme of the age order, which had the greatest significance in European-Mediterranean culture before the scientification of the study of man. For in Greco-Roman antiquity and ancient European culture, seven was the mythically and religiously authenticated number for the division of age par excellence. Under the claim of the spiritual expansion of scientific human research, Steiner here falls back to the level of a pre-scientific theory of age, which, with its schematic rhythm, does not so much intend to describe the soul development of the individual as to prescribe it. As an anachronism of the soul, Steiner’s theory of septennial development cannot be constructively discussed within the disciplinary framework of modern empirical-scientific developmental psychology, even if its stage scheme reveals superficial affinities with the conceptions of Jean Piaget or Oswald Kroh. Strictly speaking, therefore, the anthroposophical doctrine of development cannot be regarded as the result of authentic research of his own; there is much to suggest that Steiner found the seven-year scheme in the “secret teaching” of Helena Blavatsky, his theosophical forerunner, and then adapted it (cf. Ullrich, 1991, pp. 117–118).

With his teaching of the four temperaments – melancholic, phlegmatic, sanguine and choleric – Steiner did not create a new kind of personality psychology. Here again, in contrast to the scientific personality psychology of his time, he falls back on the four-temperament scheme of the late antique Hippocratic study of man and attempts to interpret it from a theosophical perspective. This is done through the exposition of numerous spiritual-cosmic affinities between temperament and physical shape, dominant body region, disease tendency, remedy, favourite colour, season, age, national character, etc. Steiner did not develop the psychological characterisation of the temperaments and the pedagogical maxims for their “treatment” himself but took them for the most part and with only slight modifications from the popular advice literature of his time, especially the writings of the priest

Bernhard Hellwig (cf. Ullrich, 1991, pp. 171–175). In terms of conceptual clarity and descriptive differentiation, Steiner's teaching of the four cosmic temperaments still lags behind the romantic-speculative soul teaching of a Carus. Empirical-exact personality psychology has extensively problematised the diagnostic weakness and lack of validity of such a psychophysical total typology. Partly because in its light nine-tenths of a population must appear to most observers as "mixed types", research has long since abandoned the traditional doctrine of the four temperaments. Modern neuropsychological research, which is again concerned with constitution or temperament, also avoids typological simplifications and generalisations.

Under the claim to expand the specialised normal-scientific human research with a "spiritual-scientific", holistic-viewing knowledge, the Waldorf educators still hold on to the old-European septennial doctrine and the Hippocratic-Galenic four-scheme of the temperaments. In doing so, however, they are by no means transcending the conceptual-abstract thinking and the empirical-quantitative form of knowledge of modern science; rather, they are returning to the pictorial-analogising ways of thinking of myth. Ullrich considers the forms of thought and perception of mythical consciousness in the sense of the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer to be the key to understanding the anthroposophical worldview and the pedagogical anthropology arising from it. These are the following: 1. Nothing in the world happens by chance, but everything by explainable intention (mythical concept of causality). 2. Everywhere in the world and in man, the same forces are at work, which can be seen in full material definiteness; according to the law of metamorphosis, they can come to work indiscriminately in all spheres of being. Every similarity or sameness between two phenomena indicates that the same force is at work in them, hence the possibility and necessity of almost inconclusive analogies (mythical concept of substance). 3. The structure of the whole is found in each part; here, too, the substantial principle of identity prevails, the spatial expression of which is the idea of the unity of microcosm and macrocosm (mythical concept of space). 4. The whole of time is not experienced in uniform linear continuity and succession but is divided according to the mythical sense of phase into time-forms, in which the rhythms of becoming and passing are revealed (mythical concept of time). 5. The number is not a number of order or function but a number of things and structures; each number has its own essence and its own special power; what carries the same number carries the same essence in itself (mythical concept of number). 6. In contrast to the scientific conception of the soul as an inconceivable quantity, the idea of the division of the soul prevails here; i.e., in one and the same human being, quite different souls or "bodies" can exist together (mythical conception of person). 7. By virtue of mythical belief in the unbroken unity and continuity of life, human existence has no limit in space and time; hence, the belief in survival after death, in the transmigration of souls and re-embodiment of the spirit, as well as in fate and retribution (mythical concept of existence) (cf. Ullrich, 1991, pp. 196–203).

In Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and thus also in Waldorf education's study of the human being, we encounter the old familiar face of myth again today. If it is true that this desire for myth is the central concern of anthroposophy, then this means that in the encounter between Waldorf education and educational science, fundamentally different forms of knowledge with different interests in knowledge meet. Max Scheler's sociological distinction between knowledge of achievement, education and salvation could be helpful in dealing with the difficulties of understanding that may arise: Anthroposophy addresses the general human desire for deeper knowledge about the whence, whither and wherefore of our lives. Such a longing expects its fulfilment to give meaning to one's own existence and especially also to one's pedagogical action. Here, the path of knowledge is a path of education or salvation, and the knowledge gained is a path of education or salvation. This spiritual interest in knowledge must be clearly distinguished from methodical-critical scientific knowledge. (cf. Ullrich, 2015, pp. 138–140)

The criticism of the developmental model on which Waldorf education is based has been further elaborated by Marc Fabian Buck (2016) from an educational-theoretical position. Buck assumes that two constant basic features are inherent in modern theories of education and upbringing: the ability to self-formation and education as participatory interaction. Buck reproaches the strictly normative understanding of development in Waldorf education:

The *Bildsamkeit* [ability to self-formation] of the individual is negated by a radically deterministic anthropology which, by virtue of its esoteric nature, . . . immunises itself against insights and contradictions. A co-determination of those to be educated in the strictly timed development process is thus neither considered necessary nor desirable.

(Buck, 2016, p. 54)

The Steiner model of development also does not allow for any modernisation.

Harm Paschen (1994) has repeatedly objected to systematic research that only deals critically with the scientifically questionable foundations of Waldorf education because we do not “learn how it [i.e., Waldorf education] is actually to be understood pedagogically, and above all not by what pedagogical tasks and problems its pedagogy is actually measured” (Paschen, 1994, p. 51). Paschen sees Waldorf's education as a “current example of a spiritually deepened pedagogy practised in the modern age” (Paschen, 1994, p. 60). He sees the task of educational science not in systematically analysing the scientificity of the anthroposophical foundations of this spiritual pedagogy but in pragmatically investigating and empirically validating its pedagogical use, performance and effectiveness. Waldorf education remains an important

source of inspiration for educational science, if only because of its many years of practical experience. “Its empirical achievements, its means, aims, problem and situation analyses must then each be considered comparatively with those of other current pedagogies for subject didactic, curricular, organisational, educational theory and methodological tasks” (Paschen, 1994, p. 58).

If we look back at the reception of Waldorf education in educational science as a whole that we have presented so far, we will have to say that it has been exclusively literary and not in the strict sense historical and empirical. The results of the thematically refining analyses remain largely determined by the chosen starting point. Some are impressed by the “alternative” educational practice of one Waldorf school, often generalising it to all the others and, *nolens volens*, neglecting the ideological convictions of the teachers who shape it – even and especially in the professional dialogue with them. The others begin with a critical examination of the ideological foundations of Waldorf education, which alienate them, and in the process, often lose an unbiased view of the educational reality of Waldorf schools, which is increasingly appealing to many people. Hans Scheuerl has rightly pointed out that these two basic directions of educational discourse have existed as long as the Waldorf school itself. Since then, their representatives have only gone around in circles faster and faster and have hardly generated any new insights (cf. Scheuerl, 1993).

Empirical Research on Waldorf Schools

With German reunification and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the 1990s saw the beginning of an expansion of Waldorf schools eastwards into the former socialist states. In the new federal states alone, 25 Waldorf schools have been opened by 2018, bringing their total number in Germany to 228. With 85,536 pupils, Waldorf schools have become the third largest provider in the German private school sector after Catholic and Protestant schools. At about the same time as this increase in importance, a marked process of academisation has been taking place in Waldorf teacher training in Germany over the last two decades – also accelerated by the “Bologna Process” of harmonising and grading university courses and harmonising degrees. What were once teacher-training colleges are now becoming privately run colleges of Waldorf education. The spearheads of this development in Germany are the *Alanus University for Art and Society* in Alfter near Bonn and the *Stuttgart School of Spiritual Science*. Their state approval as scientific universities (2002 and 1999, respectively) and subsequent accreditations are linked to a commitment to establishing a culture of science and research that is open to the world. Examples of the research practice supported by Waldorf-oriented university teachers include the journal *Research on Steiner Education* (RoSE), the *Waldorf Education Handbook* by Jost Schieren (2016) and the *Historiography of Waldorf Education* by Volker Frielingsdorf (2019).

This fourth phase of school development is characterised not only by the internationalisation and academisation of Waldorf education but also by its massive opening to empirical studies from the field of school research. There is currently no other school culture from classical *Reformpädagogik* that has as many and varied empirical findings as Waldorf schools in Germany. This can also be attributed to the high degree of institutionalisation of Waldorf education, which has its own research infrastructure.³ The rich body of research provides information about the milieu, parents' orientations and motives for choosing a school, the graduates of Waldorf schools, their success at school and their educational experiences, the profession, the self-image of Waldorf teachers and their educational work.

Waldorf schools are relatively homogeneous in terms of the social background of the Waldorf parents. Approximately 95% of Waldorf parents have German citizenship, and about 75% of them have a university entrance qualification, versus the national average of 31% (Koolmann et al., 2018, pp. 50–51). They thus largely belong to the education-oriented academic middle class, whose resources are characterised less by economic capital and more by cultural and social capital. An above-average number of parents are themselves teachers at state schools (Barz & Randoll, 2007; Leber, 1981). The quantitative questionnaire study by Koolmann et al. (2018) provides a more up-to-date and differentiated picture of Waldorf parents in Germany with a representative claim to validity. Here, parents were asked not only about their socio-economic status but also about their values and attitudes, their social engagement and their experiences with the Waldorf school. The authors of the study distinguish five types of values: 1. conservative (29%), 2. convinced (23%), 3. enthusiastic (20%), 4. demanding (16%) and 5. reserved (12%). Types 2, 3 and 5 are closest to anthroposophy. For the authors of the study, Waldorf parents “are not elitist – neither financially nor mentally. . . . at most in their commitment and in their resolute will for something specific” (Koolmann et al., 2018, p. 241). The – programmatically unintentional – social exclusivity of the Waldorf school milieu also seems to apply to other European countries (cf. for Sweden Dahlin, 2007).

The results of the graduate study by Barz and Randoll (2007) also provide a differentiated view of the education and life of Waldorf graduates. Without going into detail here, the findings show that the high esteem in which the Waldorf school is held by the alumni, many of whom also send their children to a Waldorf school, is not associated with identification with anthroposophy; more than half of them are critical or indifferent to anthroposophy. Criticism is expressed of low performance standards, the quality of science teaching and a lack of open-mindedness towards newer educational developments.

Other studies have examined the Waldorf learning culture from the pupils' point of view. The findings tend to correspond with the views and

3 *Pedagogical Research Centre*. www.forschung-waldorf.de.

experiences of the alumni in terms of the predominantly positive balance of experiences, the attachment to the Waldorf school, the critical distance to the Steiner world view and the criticism of the lack of innovation and the performance culture in the classroom. Here, on the one hand, are broader quantitative studies (Liebenwein et al., 2012; Randoll, 1999) as well as case studies and detailed studies that work with qualitative procedures and, in part, also with methodological triangulation (Handwerk, 2011, on aesthetic experiences; Zdražil, 2000, on health behaviour). On the basis of these studies, the findings can be differentiated.

Waldorf students pursue high educational aspirations, even though many take advantage of private tutoring. Liebenwein et al. (2012) used data from other studies in their student survey, although their comparability is limited due to much more heterogeneous samples. The Waldorf pupils identified more strongly with their school and also felt more comfortable there than the comprehensive school pupils from mainstream schools who were compared with them (cf. also Zdražil, 2000). Their statements on the joy of learning and school satisfaction were about 10–20% higher than those of the comparison group, and they also rated their relationships with their teachers better. The value orientations of the Waldorf pupils differed only in a few areas from those of their peers in the Shell study (2006): they wanted to determine their lives more themselves (75% vs. 63%) and enjoy them (73% vs. 47%), live more health-conscious (61% vs. 48%) and make more emotionally based decisions (57% vs. 46%). Significantly less important for them were diligence and ambition (47% vs. 55%) and security (37% vs. 53%). This is hardly surprising because they come from a social milieu, which – economically well-secured – gives high priority to post-material value orientations such as self-realisation.

The quantitative comparison of Abitur performance in the advanced biology course between Waldorf students and *Abitur* [A-levels] students from public *Gymnasien* [high schools] in the federal state of Hesse shows no significant differences (Rohde, 2022). The findings show that Waldorf school leavers compensate for the knowledge gaps that may have arisen from the many years of grade exemption and the phenomenological natural history lessons in the middle school “to the extent that in the [central H.U.] biology school-leaving examination in a similar way, or even better, than the regular pupils” (Rohde, 2022, p. 240). On the basis of the documentary reconstruction of key cases from the sample of 24 interviews with Abitur students, Rohde develops four different types of student habitus (calculating, confiding, cautious, tolerating) in the qualitative part of his study, which can be found both among the Gymnasium students and the Waldorf students. He cannot identify a specific “Waldorf student habitus”.

In the 2000s, a number of qualitative-reconstructive studies on the pedagogy of Waldorf schools emerged from a DFG project, i.e., outside the context of research funded by the *Association of Waldorf Schools* (Helsper et al., 2007, on the specificity of the class teacher as a guiding authority; Idel, 2007, on Waldorf school biographies; Graßhoff, 2008, on the working alliance

between teachers, parents and pupils; Hüblich, 2010, on the interplay of Waldorf school, biography and gender; Kunze, 2011, on teacher biographies). In their extensive research project *Autorität und Schule* [Authority and School], Helsper et al. (2007) investigated the special quality of the pedagogical relationships between early adolescent Waldorf pupils and their class teachers, by whom they had already been taught for eight years without interruption in the approximately eight subjects of the main lesson. At three Waldorf schools, after an ethnographic observation phase, the main lessons of the class teacher were videotaped for a week, professional biographical interviews were conducted with the class teachers, (school) biographical interviews were conducted with four selected pupils in each of the eighth grades, the verbal reports of the seventh grade were additionally documented for these pupils and finally a group discussion with selected teachers and representatives was recorded in each of the three Waldorf schools. A central finding of the case reconstructions is that Waldorf schools obviously offer social spaces and atmospheres through their special pedagogical character, in which long-standing teacher-pupil relationships can be so intensively developed that they far transcend the role expectations common in public schools.

All in all, these fine-grained reconstructive studies draw attention in an exemplary manner that cannot be generalised according to the rules of numerical representativeness to the preconditions of harmonious fitting relationships between class teachers and pupils in the pedagogically delimited learning and educational culture of Waldorf schools, from which developmentally productive influences can then emanate. Pupils with special high-cultural interests and extraordinary musical, artistic or other creative talents find very special spaces for development in lessons with the class teacher. Conversely, youth-cultural counter-designs can lead to conflicts and repulsions in a particularly sharp way because they hardly remain hidden due to the inclusion of the pupils as a whole person and due to the anthroposophically based patterns of acceptable lifestyle. The special authority figure and her pedagogical claim to a relationship is, at the same time, the enabling condition for very sustainable and supportive dyads between teachers and pupils who find themselves in special biographical or family difficulties (Idel, 2013).

There are now also some reliable empirical findings from quantitative and qualitative studies on the teachers at Waldorf schools, their origins and approaches (Barz, 1994; Kunze, 2011; Kuttner et al., 2014; Martzog et al., 2018; Randoll, 2013). The studies, some of which are also comparative in nature, show that Waldorf students, as well as professionally experienced Waldorf teachers, tend to have more development-oriented ideas about education; they view education in schools and lessons more strongly as a primarily holistic process-oriented towards the child's stage of development. In view of the high idealistic demands on one's own work, which are often described as a "vocation", the fact that newly recruited Waldorf class teachers only stay at a school for a short time of about four years must give pause for thought.

Just as heterogeneous as the Waldorf teachers are their training paths into the profession: Less than half (46%) of them have completed a teacher training course at a university, an equally large proportion have completed another university course, a pedagogical or therapeutic course or a course in handicrafts and supplemented this with additional Waldorf education courses; the class teachers, in particular can, look back on several years of basic training at a seminar for Waldorf education.

The central tension in the professional field of Waldorf teachers results from the high esteem for the pedagogical autonomy of each individual teacher (“educational artist”) on the one hand and the simultaneous obligation of all to the collegial self-administration and leadership of the school on the other. While the – compared to teachers at state comprehensive schools – higher job satisfaction of Waldorf teachers (92% vs. 71%) and the lower prevalence of risky personality-specific patterns of work-related behaviour and experience (50% vs. 59%) results from the experience of their own extensive possibilities for shaping their school, a comparatively higher psychosocial stress experience among Waldorf teachers arises from dissatisfaction with the inefficiency and lack of transparency of the decision-making processes within the school in the often only seemingly flat hierarchy of a teaching staff without a headmaster’s office. The almost unanimous commitment to anthroposophy, which, according to the Waldorf teachers, also provides relief, also shows the specificity and exclusivity of this reform school culture, in which denomination and profession are still more closely connected than in any other in this country.

Research Perspectives on the History of Education

In contrast to the internal Waldorf literature on Rudolf Steiner (e.g., Lindenberg, 1997), the historical context in which Waldorf education emerged and its role in the dramatic decades of German history in the 20th century has so far attracted little interest in established research on the history of education. In view of this, the recently published source-saturated monograph by Waldorf educator and historian Volker Frielingsdorf (2019) *Geschichte der Waldorfpädagogik* [History of Waldorf Education] can certainly offer a first well-informed general overview of this. However, in many respects, his references are dominated by anthroposophical publications and a consistently apologetic style.

This is also evident, for example, in the detailed account of the fate of Waldorf schools under National Socialism, which is largely based on the works of anthroposophists Wenzel Götte and Uwe Werner. In contrast, the critical work of Achim Leschinsky (1983), which is still decisive for the discourse on this difficult period for Waldorf education, is only marginally acknowledged. Leschinsky uses a wide range of files to investigate the astonishing fact that Waldorf schools were not banned until years after Hitler came to power between 1938 and 1941. He is interested in the “unexplained” side

of the apparently ambivalent relationship between Waldorf education and National Socialism. In the wake of the ban on the *Anthroposophical Society* as an organisation of Freemasonry and the occult, the *Reich Ministry of Education* imposed a ban on Waldorf schools in March 1936. However, this was lifted again at the beginning of 1939 after three Steiner schools were able to continue operating as state experimental schools thanks to the support of the top Nazi party leadership in the sphere of influence of Rudolf Hess (“Deputy of the *Führer*”). As is well known, of central importance for this singular opportunity was a statement and an expert opinion on Steiner and the pedagogy he had conceived by the leading National Socialist pedagogue Alfred Bäumler. He saw in the Waldorf schools for the first time “the traditional school system of the Enlightenment with its intellectualism overcome from a new basic approach” (Bäumler, quoted in Leschinsky, 1983, p. 271). Leschinsky concludes that Waldorf education and National Socialism should be understood “for all their differences as movements of an anti-modernism” which were directed at devaluing and relativising rational thinking in science and society (cf. Leschinsky, 1983, p. 273).

A long-standing gap in research into the history of Waldorf education concerns its relationship to reform education and theosophy, whose main representative in the German-speaking countries from 1902 to 1913 was Rudolf Steiner. Frielingsdorf’s history of Waldorf education does not shed any light on this. “This suppression of the connection with theosophy, which is regarded as a mesalliance, has a tradition in Waldorf education and in theosophical circles in general, but is unacceptable for a historical account” (Zander, 2021, p. 626). The overview study by Ullrich (2021) deals with the position of Waldorf education within theosophical reform education. His central finding is that the Theosophical movement played a significant role in international reform education. From its protagonists came important impulses, both programmatically and in terms of school practice, which eventually led to the constitution of the *World Alliance for the Renewal of Education* (New Education Fellowship) and to the founding of numerous reform schools in Europe and the United States as well as in India and Australia. But unlike Catherine Tingley, Maria Montessori, Annie Besant and Beatrice Ensor, for example, the leading theosophist – and later anthroposophist – Steiner was only marginally interested in educational policy and school pedagogical issues. In 1919, programmatically unprepared, he was struck like a bolt from the blue by Emil Molt’s plan to found the *Free Waldorf School* for the children of the working class of his *Waldorf Astoria* cigar factory in Stuttgart. Waldorf education is both an offshoot and an outsider to the theosophical reform movement. It differs profoundly in theory and practice from the other worldwide theosophical start-ups:

Whereas they grew out of English life and institutions and took up their stance in relation to the public schools, the liberalism of early political emancipating movements, religious unorthodoxy, and the Anglicised

transplanting of Freud, Steiner schools have always been based on a thought system and a creed which bear clear marks of Germanic origin.
(Steward, 1968, p. 168)

In generating the norms and forms of the Waldorf school, Rudolf Steiner relied on the one hand on his theosophical-anthroposophical worldview to the greatest extent imaginable, leading to a spiritualisation of almost all areas of school culture that is historically unprecedented. On the other hand, he drew on the concept of elementary school pedagogy that he had encountered during his school and study years in Vienna: Herbartianism. Similar to Johann Friedrich Herbart and his successors, Rudolf Steiner also tried to develop the pedagogy and didactics of his Waldorf school from a supreme norm of meaning and to derive the entire teaching structure from there, right down to the teaching method. For him, the paths of school education towards the “whole person” are firstly the cultural stage curriculum, which, with its authoritative themes, synchronises the stages of the child’s development with the Epochs of human history. Secondly, the principle of concentration, according to which, at each grade level, certain exemplary narrative materials form the interdisciplinary point of reference for all the other contents of the school year. Thirdly, the class teacher, who is supposed to take over the entire education of the pupils entrusted to him for eight years with authoritative ductus by presenting them with almost all the topics of the pedagogical curriculum and holding them together through the daily narrative materials (cf. also Ullrich, 2022). Finally, a teaching method according to which every lesson consists of the stages of deepening and reflection, as with Herbart, but which in the Waldorf school are accentuated more experientially in the “holistic” rhythm of willing, feeling and thinking. “Seen in this light, Waldorf education in its structure and formal understanding of education and teaching is a variant of Herbartianism, however original and novel it may appear” (Prange, 2000, p. 84).

Conclusion

In retrospect, it should be noted that the professional discourse on Waldorf education in Germany is still characterised by profound ambivalences. It begins in *Reformpädagogik* with an emphasis on the impressive practice of Waldorf schools while at the same time distancing itself from their “dubious” theory. This view has subsequently become more differentiated in parallel with the growth of the Steiner schools and remains determined by the respective disciplinary location or the epistemological interest of the educational science actors. From a school pedagogical-pragmatic perspective, Waldorf education is still regarded today as a stimulating contrast to the public schools and kindergartens, characterized, among other things, by all-round education of the personality, greater autonomy for teachers and specialists and a genetic art of teaching. Theoretical and systematic research

deals hermeneutically with the historical classification of ideas and largely critically with the scientific dubiousness of the anthropological foundations of Waldorf education as well as the structure of the Waldorf school as an unacknowledged worldview school. Studies in the history of education place Waldorf education, on the one hand, in the context of international theosophical reform education and determine it therein as an outsider with the late Herbartianist teaching and learning culture of the 19th century. On the other hand, they characterise Steiner's pedagogy as a movement in the broad tradition stream of anti-modernism. Finally, the socio-scientific-empirical studies show today's Waldorf schools in Germany to be, among other things, a socially largely homogeneous school milieu with academically educated, highly cultural parents and a very satisfied student body. The teachers have very heterogeneous professional biographies; the common bond is the personal significance of anthroposophy. The particularly close pedagogical relationships formed by the class teachers from the first to the eighth grade are experienced by the pupils as developmentally productive or conflictual-authoritarian, depending on the school-cultural fit.

Due to their strong expansion in recent decades, Waldorf schools and kindergartens have become the second largest provider in the private education sector after the denominational providers. Independent training to become a Waldorf teacher now also takes place at an academic level in anthroposophically oriented scientific universities whose teaching and research culture manifests itself in ambitious publication series, their own specialist journals and in dialogue initiatives with university educational science. Nevertheless, Waldorf education has remained a special world. How high the walls to the outside world can still be is shown, for example, by the failure of the cooperation between an intercultural Waldorf initiative and a public primary school in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg in 2016.

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2 The German Waldorf Wars of 2007

Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, Empirical Turns and the Problem of Racism

Ansgar Martins

In 2022/2023, roughly 90,000 pupils were enrolled at the 240 German Waldorf schools.¹ They made up just one percent of the 8.7 million pupils attending a total of 32,666 German schools. In this light, the prominence and frequency with which the Waldorf movement features – for better or for worse – in German public debate seems oddly disproportionate. The remarkably extensive coverage is partly positive and partly negative, and Waldorf traditionalists like to seize on critical coverage to portray the movement as buffeted by incomprehension and hostility from all sides. I would argue, however, that the frequency and intensity of such controversies demonstrate the very opposite; it speaks to the extent to which Waldorf pedagogy has long since become part of the furniture in contemporary Germany.

To illustrate this, I focus on controversies that came to a head and important changes that occurred in the Waldorf universe in 2007. At the time, there were 80,939 pupils enrolled at schools accredited by the *Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen* [BdFWS, Association of Free Waldorf Schools]; the number of students attending one of the eight Waldorf teacher training seminars stood at 957, and a further 353 were enrolled in in-service training courses (cf. Krauch, 2007). Specifically, I examine (1) debates concerning the sense, nonsense and enduring popularity of traditional Waldorf school culture; (2) the impact of a twofold empirical turn in Waldorf research and (3) approaches to the problem of racism and racists in anthroposophy. As I show in the final section, while traditionalists saw themselves positively encircled by foes in all these respects, the Waldorf movement actually emerged strengthened, not weakened, by the apparent vagaries of 2007.

1 This chapter was translated by Lars Fischer (The History Practice, Berlin).

Preservation or Radical Overhaul? Two Competing Accounts of the Status Quo

The Cooking Spoon Principle: Rüdiger Iwan's Fundamental Critique

We start with a now almost forgotten book on Waldorf pedagogy – Rüdiger Iwan's (2007) *Die neue Waldorfschule. Ein Erfolgsmodell wird renoviert* [The New Waldorf school. A Successful Template is Revamped]. Published by the mainstream publisher *Rowohlt*, it was aimed at a broad readership.² Iwan took issue with a school culture that, on his account, fell short of the ideals of Waldorf pedagogy. At first glance, Iwan's was hardly an original move: the accusation of doctrinal laxity allowed him, like many of his peers before him, to present his own interpretation of Steiner's worldview as the true basis on which (in this case) Waldorf pedagogy ought to be predicated. Critics, in turn, denounced the renewal he proposed as "verSteinert" – the German term for petrified, but obviously, also a wordplay on Steiner's name meaning Steinerised. Iwan may have developed "a thoroughly critical approach to current Waldorf practice", but Steiner's ideological convictions loomed large over all the changes he proposed (Geuenich, 2009, p. 121). *Inter alia*, Iwan invoked Steiner's struggle against bureaucratisation tendencies within the movement (cf. Iwan, 2007, p. 23).

Yet Iwan's critique was more fundamental, notably when it came to what he considered the abandonment of the project's dynamic potential, and it went far beyond what one might classify as constructive criticism. Instead of offering a "revolutionary alternative" to their mainstream counterparts, Waldorf schools had, since their inception, undergone a constant process of doctrinal ossification (Iwan, 2007, p. 28). For Iwan, this problem was encapsulated in what he called the "cooking spoon principle". Attending a conference at the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart on 16th January 1921, Steiner was asked by the arts and crafts instructor Max Wolffhügel about suitable assignments for fifth-graders. Steiner is said to have replied that the children should refrain as far as possible from making anything superfluous and instead focus their attention on the production of useful objects such as cooking spoons. So, the children – "and not just the generations of fifth-graders taught by Mr Wolffhügel" – have made cooking spoons ever since (Iwan, 2007, p. 29). Real-existing Waldorf education, Iwan argued, was to what it might be what the production of cooking spoons in year five was to meaningful arts and crafts instruction.

Similar forms of diminishment were in evidence across the board, Iwan lamented. The "monthly celebrations" at which pupils were supposed to present what they had learnt had degenerated into pre-arranged costume parties

2 Both reform education and anthroposophy have a certain tradition at *Rowohlt*, which also published two important books by the legendary Waldorf teacher Christoph Lindenberg (1975, 1992).

(cf. Iwan, 2007, pp. 30–38). Contrary to Steiner’s instructions, the children were given far too much homework (cf. Iwan, 2007, pp. 38–45). Iwan also took issue with the descriptive end-of-year reports Waldorf pupils received instead of grades. Poorly chosen formulations could do just as much harm as an unjustified mark, he insisted, and the reports were all too often rendered meaningless by their clichéd and formulaic wording (Iwan, 2007, p. 53). Hence, the respective advantages and disadvantages of the different forms of end-of-year reporting needed to be revisited. Examinations should challenge the students’ “power of judgement” in a discernible manner (Iwan, 2007, p. 57). The “misunderstood principle” of epoch teaching was applied in too dogmatic a fashion (cf. Iwan, 2007, pp. 60–81), and rather than timetabling specific subjects separately, interdisciplinary subjects should have been introduced. Finally, Iwan argued that the “self-prescribed dilettantism” of school “self-administration” (Iwan, 2007, pp. 105–119) pointed to a pathological form of collectivism:

Waldorf schools are fundamentally about community. Whether it concerns a large class, a school celebration or a school conference, the preferred form of organisation is the collective. Split up the conference? Only if it is absolutely necessary! The flock only feels really comfortable when all the sheep are together. The ideal seems to be a social gathering that is elevated to the universal: an imaginary all-embracing body in which teachers, parents and pupils of all Waldorf schools agonise around the clock and around the globe about all the issues at hand until a final consensus is reached. Where else but in the big round could stagnation be more aptly celebrated?

(Iwan, 2007, pp. 115–116)

At the time, Iwan also propagated a portfolio-based reform pedagogical model designed to allow pupils to track and document their learning process (Iwan, 2007, p. 129). Jochen Krautz (2009), who, at the time, held a chair at the anthroposophical *Alanus University*, rightly criticised this model as a means of initiating pupils into the neoliberal compulsion to engage in constant self-improvement. While the portfolio model flourished for a short while at some Waldorf schools, Iwan’s book ultimately left no discernible mark, its brief controversial reception in the Waldorf movement notwithstanding. That said, *info3*, the Frankfurt-based, most widely circulated and most liberal anthroposophical journal, courted Iwan for some time, and his status as a proponent of “radical” reform is firmly established in the more reflective anthroposophical literature (cf. Frielingsdorf, 2012, p. 81, 145).

When Nostalgia is the Pull Factor: The First Waldorf Graduate Study

That Iwan’s intervention received little sustained attention is likely explained not least by the fact that concurrent empirical social research demonstrated

the appeal of the existing system. The path-breaking empirical study, *Absolventen von Waldorfschulen* [Graduates of Waldorf Schools], was published by Heiner Barz, a professor of educational research and management at Düsseldorf University, in collaboration with Dirk Randoll, the head of the department of education and empirical social research at *Alanus University*. While both were at least as closely affiliated with Waldorf education as Iwan, they brought to their study of three cohorts of Waldorf graduates the rigorous characteristic of much of the relevant research at the time and presented “the most differentiated survey to date” (Ullrich, 2015, p. 151). Their research focussed both on the development and careers of the graduates and on their (as a general rule) educated middle-class parents (many of whom were state-school teachers). According to Barz and Randoll, many of the graduates worked in desirable, creative professions that offered them a sense of self-realisation. They tended to identify strongly with their former school. Although they acknowledged that their schooling had left them with sometimes substantial knowledge deficits, 63% of respondents felt that Waldorf schools were superior to other kinds of schools.

While the competence of the form teachers in particular in offering pastoral support, reassurance and orientation was more or less consistently stressed, and their unwavering commitment and motivating style of teaching were praised, doubts were not infrequently raised concerning their subject-related competence. There are also some negative experiences with individual overly dogmatic, strict or bigoted Waldorf teachers – overall, the recollections are nevertheless extremely positive.

(Barz & Randoll, 2007, p. 20)

It should be noted, however, that the survey did not raise any questions with the respondents that might have encouraged criticism at a more fundamental level, and the partisan vantage of the survey is unmistakable throughout.

Iwan’s critical and Barz and Randoll’s affirmative findings seem to suggest that rigid adherence to once-established practices, what Iwan identified as the cooking spoon principle, was precisely what pupils and their parents (notably the teachers among them) valued about the Waldorf schools. It offered the experience of an orderly and wholesome cosmos. I would argue that Iwan’s ambitious vision ultimately failed to resonate because the constituency to which he appealed did not want the kind of “alternative to school” he envisaged but “merely” an alternative form of school. Of course, it is worth bearing in mind that, however fanciful the parents’ aspirations might otherwise be, their children ultimately need to acquire accredited qualifications by the time they leave school.

It is striking that the rigid model that reformers within the Waldorf movement have come to reject no less than the critics of Waldorf pedagogy has emerged as one of the principal unifying characteristics of Waldorf education

internationally (cf. Martins, 2022, p. 583; for the vantage of a newcomer at the time, cf. Thome, 2008). Yet, while this orthopraxy persists, the underlying concepts have increasingly been forgotten in recent decades, creating a culture shaped by folkloristic rituals void of conscious anthroposophical content. This trend was already clearly discernible in Barz and Randall's (2007) account. Across the three cohorts they surveyed, the proportion of former Waldorf pupils who described themselves as "practising/engaged" anthroposophists fell from 17% to 7%, while the percentage of respondents who characterised themselves as indifferent to, or critical of, anthroposophy increased from 53% to 61%.

Moreover, in a follow-up survey of Waldorf teachers (Randall, 2013), only 33.9% of the respondents described themselves as "practising/committed" anthroposophists. How reliable, then, might the knowledge of, and commitment to, the anthroposophical underpinnings of Waldorf pedagogy be among the remaining two-thirds of the respondents? More than half (52.1%) stated that they "rarely" consulted Steiner's writings (Randall, 2013, p. 156), although they were likely to draw strength from nature (Randall, 2013, p. 139). Just under half had some use for meditation, approximately half as many (25%) enjoyed watching television (cf. Randall, 2013, p. 158).

To be sure, a much more differentiated and complex set of questions would be required to gain a more profound sense of the extent to which Waldorf practice continues to be infused, directly or indirectly, with the anthroposophical concepts supposedly underpinning it. Even so, the aforementioned data clearly indicates a general trend. Klaus Prange may have been right in arguing that the Waldorf curriculum is "anthroposophical down to the detail of the presentation of legends and biographies, minerals and flowers, animals and stories". Yet his contention that anthroposophy is instilled in pupils all the more effectively for not being "taught in an outright and obvious manner" and presented to them, instead, in a form mediated through specific themes (Prange, 2000, p. 117) seems doubtful in light of recent research that has consistently demonstrated a decrease in the anthroposophical commitment of Waldorf schools as well as the recruitment difficulties the *Anthroposophical Society* has been facing since the 1980s (cf. Martins, 2023, pp. 66–67). Only a minority of Waldorf teachers and very few graduates are now genuinely familiar with the anthroposophical basis of Waldorf pedagogy. Of course, where awareness of the ideological basis of one's established symbolic practices is lost, they maintain their religious aura even while individuals and the collective ascribe new meanings to them, creating a kind of secondary anthroposophy. To return to Iwan's cooking spoon principle: once I lose sight of the fact that fifth-graders are supposed to produce cooking spoons simply because they are useful, I am at liberty to ascribe any number of aesthetic and existential meanings to the cooking spoon.

The persistence of this kind of Waldorf folklore and its religious symbolism needs to be understood against the backdrop of its roots in Christian tradition. The cycle of Waldorf festivals essentially emulates the Catholic liturgical

year, albeit with the help of felt and beeswax. There is much to be said for Zander's contention that anthroposophy functions "as a Catholicisation programme for Protestants" (Zander, 2019, p. 190). This would also explain why it tends to be more successful in historically Protestant than in traditionally Catholic countries. Rather than embarking on a quest for the ostensible profoundly Steinerian underpinnings of Waldorf pedagogy, critique from the vantage of religious studies ought really to turn its attention to the social context and function of the now dominant forms of its practice.

The reception of Barz and Randoll's study clearly indicated the measure of social acceptance German Waldorf schools have come to enjoy. The sympathetic review published in the widely respected weekly *Der Spiegel* on 23rd April 2007 is a case in point. Since most of the Waldorf graduates, asked what they had found "redundant" at their school, had named expressive dance eurythmy (cf. Barz & Randoll, 2007, p. 276), the review bore the title, "Hassfach Eurythmie" [Pet Peeve Eurythmy]. Yet, in the main, its author stressed how much the respondents had felt at ease at and valued by their former schools, shortcomings in the field of science and foreign language teaching notwithstanding. To illustrate the potential value of a Waldorf education, he noted that Michael Rogowski, one of Germany's most influential managers, who, until recently, had stood at the helm of the *Federation of German Industries* (BDI), was a Waldorf graduate. The gist of the review was encapsulated in Rogowski's statement that, since his own Waldorf education had left him sorely wanting in maths and physics, he would hesitate to recruit Waldorf graduates as design engineers, but he would hire them in an instant "as communication specialists: 'Their strengths lie in all those areas where personality plays an important role'" (Holm, 2007, April 23).³

Questioning the Unquestionable: The Vagaries of Academic Normalisation

The Implications of the Twofold Empirical Turn

While Barz and Randoll's (2007) survey of Waldorf graduates was perhaps the best-known, even at the time, it was by no means the only study of its kind (cf., for example, Idel, 2007, Helsper & Ullrich, 2007), and a steady stream of similar empirical analyses has come out since.⁴ They have fundamentally changed the parameters of academic Waldorf research. Take, for example, the case of Heiner Ullrich, who, some two decades earlier, established himself in the field with a study rigorously scrutinising Waldorf pedagogy from the vantage of the critique of ideology. At the time, one would hardly have assumed that

3 For subsequent letters to the editor, see N. N. (2007, May 6).

4 See Frielingsdorf (2012, pp. 68–85) for an (anthroposophically) annotated bibliography covering the period in question.

he might one day write a preface for Barz and Randall's survey. In short, the "empirical turn" (Schieren, 2016, p. 13) created a common methodological platform equally acceptable to both educationalists critical of the Waldorf concept and anthroposophical academics. The Waldorf movement seized this opportunity, presenting Barz and Randall's study, above all, as confirmation that it was doing most things right while also acknowledging some problems and notably the need to improve the quality of the teaching content (c.f., for example, Boettger, 2007). The focus of relevant research thus shifted from the critical appraisal of Waldorf pedagogy to the constructive evaluation of existing practice and specific reform measures. This seems all the more remarkable in light of the fact that Ullrich concurrently co-authored a study of one of the most fundamental aspects of Waldorf pedagogy, the teacher-pupil relationship (Helsper & Ullrich, 2007), that pointed to a number of significant unresolved contradictions. Yet, like Iwan's (2007) distress call, this study went down without leaving any significant trace, as did the historical and pedagogical critiques of Oberman (2008) and Geuenich (2009), respectively.

This period nevertheless saw a number of innovations and changes in Waldorf pedagogy. These included publishing the first book on Waldorf sex education (cf. Maris & Zech, 2006). Waldorf teacher training also entered a new phase in 2007. It was previously undertaken at a number of training centres (the largest were located in Stuttgart, Mannheim and Witten-Annen), and the resulting degrees were recognised only by Waldorf schools. In addition, specialist teachers assigned to advanced secondary school classes were required to hold a university degree. In 2007, *Alanus University* in Alfter near Bonn introduced a teacher training course in art, allowing students to acquire the preliminary teaching certificate for state schools along with their Waldorf qualification, and it has since introduced a number of additional degree courses at the bachelor and master level. In 2010, the university was fully accredited by the German *Council of Science and Humanities* and the Department of Education was granted the right to award doctorates (cf. Schieren, 2016, pp. 15–16).

2007 was not just a big year for (the study of) Waldorf education; it was also a big year for the reception of anthroposophy more generally. It was the year in which Helmut Zander's (2007) 2,000-page magnum opus, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland. Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884–1945* [Anthroposophy in Germany. Theosophical Worldview and Social Practice, 1884–1945], was published. Zander offered a detailed reconstruction of Steiner's intellectual sources, focussing in particular on scientific and reform debates prevalent around 1900 and, above all, on the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, which inspired Steiner's occult turn. This was a revelation not least because, following the First World War, Steiner and his disciples had gone out of their way to present themselves not as the heirs of some alien, eastern theosophical tradition but as the true embodiment of "German spiritual life". Consequently, Zander's (2007, pp. 545–779) chapter on theosophy took centre stage in the reception of his

study. Yet there was also a chapter on the emergence of Waldorf education in the book, in which Zander traced Steiner's own education and pedagogical concepts and charted the haphazard process that led to the under-conceptualised and hastily improvised establishment of the first Waldorf school (cf. Zander, pp. 1357–1454).

Zander acknowledged the troubling aspects of Steiner's pedagogical vision, ranging from the authoritarian imposition of theosophical concepts to his alienating treatment of sexuality. Yet, he expressed his hope that none of these ever had been or ever would be "taken to their troubling logical consequence" (Zander, p. 1454). Real-life Waldorf pedagogy was not defined by its weaknesses, he suggested, and the positive experiences of many parents ultimately outweighed the theoretical concerns raised by Steiner's concepts. There was

a great deal to suggest that Waldorf teachers tended to be highly motivated and go far beyond the call of duty, something state-school parents rarely encounter, and that the mosaical and practical orientation affords considerable creative freedom. Presumably, this often outweighs the doctrinal constraints on what is taught, the authoritarian structures and the consequences of being ghettoised to some extent. Alongside the card-carrying victims of Waldorf education there are those who recall their school days with gratitude. Perhaps Walter Müller [1999, p. 125] is right when he suggests that those who embrace Waldorf education yet question anthroposophy should think of Waldorf schools as being "good schools despite anthroposophy".

(Zander, 2007, p. 1454)

Even though such aphoristic-ambivalent statements about the present garnered more attention, the value of Zander's study lay in its philological elucidation of Steiner's texts. Most readers had previously thought of Steiner either as deranged or a confidence trickster (or some combination of both) or as an exceptional individual with access to higher knowledge. Thanks to Zander, we now know a great deal about the books with which Steiner was familiar, about the debates in which he participated and about the gradual evolution of his syncretic worldview. Zander's constantly learning and improvising Steiner and his never-ending quest tallied well with the manic attitude of "permanent evolution" Iwan (2007, p. 28) identified as the impulse originally at the core of anthroposophy. Traditionalists, by contrast, tended to be troubled by Zander's suggestion that a great deal of Steiner's inspiration was perfectly this-worldly rather than transcendent.

At the time, few connected Zander's monograph and Barz and Randall's study. With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that both reflected a broader positivist trend in the humanities and social sciences. Zander's philology was no less indicative of an empirical turn than Barz and Randall's survey.

Rescuing Steiner from Blavatsky. Traditionalists in Revolt

Committed anthroposophists tended to find this twofold empirical turn no less disconcerting than many of their critics. Following the publication of Zander's magnum opus, an astonishing number of anthroposophical authors lamented what they considered his regressive positivist approach. Against the backdrop of 19th-century historicism, Zander presented Steiner and the philosophical metaphysics of history as responding to a growing emphasis on the relativity and contextuality of knowledge and the threat posed by the increasing awareness of other cultures to established notions of Western uniqueness and superiority. The contention that Biblical mythology was owed in no small measure to ancient Mesopotamian culture is a case in point. As truths previously taken for granted were drawn into question, Steiner's new "science", anthroposophy, claimed to offer a novel path to certain knowledge.

One of the many anthroposophical critics who took issue with this relativisation of Steiner's ostensible access to higher knowledge was Karen Swassjan. So great was his ire that it took a book-length rant to say what he felt needed to be said. Just as scholars a century earlier had sought to diminish the Bible by paring it down to its ostensible Mesopotamian sources, Zander now sought to diminish Steiner by paring him down to an epigone of Blavatsky. By the same logic, one would have to conclude that

Jesus is Gilgamesh. Presumably, the fact that Zander's conclusions are less crude is owed only to the fact that less time has lapsed since the life of his subject. Anyone reading Zander in 3007, should his work still be known, would be compelled to conclude from the "source research" of Zander the historicist that Steiner was Blavatsky.

(Swassjan, 2007, p. 103)

Swassjan was by no means alone among his peers in aggressively positing far-fetched inferences in an attempt to debunk Zander's achievements. As it turns out, this outrage ultimately amounted to little more than the final rear-guard action of the die-hards. A philosopher by training who has also translated works by Nietzsche or Spengler into Russian, Swassjan has consistently taken far-right positions, ranging from his apologetic comments of the 1990s on the so-called Conservative Revolution of the interwar period (cf. Swassjan, 1993, pp. 105–129) to his anti-Ukrainian stance in the context of the current Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Taking it for granted that any and all possible innovations would be heretical and diminish anthroposophy, and therefore determined to foreclose the possibility of change as a matter of principle, Swassjan (2007, p. 129) characterised the very notion of anthroposophy's historicity and, by extension, of its potential for renewal as "the primordial virus of a disease that at present seems to have become almost epidemic".

While other anthroposophists are more open-minded and willing to countenance change, few have any use for Zander's magnum opus. This must

be a matter of some frustration for him, given that he clearly sought their approval. Many anthroposophists, he wrote, assumed that

historical contextualisation detracts from Steiner's spiritual or practical impulses, but I would maintain that one can do justice both to Steiner's limitations and to his achievements only by taking their social context into account. I see no reason why historical-critical research and spiritual wisdom should be mutually attenuating or exclusive. Anyone who wants to be taken seriously in Western intellectual discourse is expected to submit their object of study to this kind of fundamentally critical, truly inquisitive, analysis. It seems to me that the refusal to engage in historical criticism is one of the reasons for the stark contrast between the practical acceptance and the intellectual skepticism encountered by anthroposophy.

(Zander, 2007, p. 1719)

While authors subsequently engaged in Steiner philology – such as Hartmut Traub and Christian Clement – also had to contend with some measure of opposition, the hateful vitriol directed at Zander remains unrivalled. In the 16th November 2007 issue of the *Nachrichten für Mitglieder* [Members' Newsletter], one of the members of the *Executive Committee* of the *General Anthroposophical Society*, Sergei Prokofieff, wrote that Zander was merely the scribe who had taken down what the demon Ahriman had dictated (cf. Husmann, 2010, p. 356). Writing in the Waldorf journal *Erziehungskunst* (The Art of Education), its editor, Lorenzo Ravagli, who was known for his questionable defence of Steiner's racial teachings as a misunderstood form of humanism (cf. Bader & Ravagli, 2002) and several lengthy diatribes directed at critics of anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy, seemed particularly incensed. In 2009, he followed up his initial rejection with a book-length critique of Zander's project, *Zanders Erzählungen* [Zander's Tales] (Ravagli, 2009). In the BdFWS's annual report for 2007, Ravagli (2007) suggested that the year might go down in the history of the Waldorf movement as the year in which Zander sought to usurp the right to explain anthroposophy to the general public. The "leaders of public opinion", alas, had accepted his interpretation as unquestioningly as "anthroposophists and Waldorf teachers are usually accused of accepting the teachings of their alleged guru" (Ravagli, 2007, p. 29). Many reviewers were only too happy to find "their deep-seated prejudices and concerns confirmed by a so-called scholar" (Ravagli, 2007, p. 29). So convinced was Ravagli of Zander's hostile intent that he evidently never considered the possibility that it might need proving in the first place. However, in one respect, he was certainly right. The empirical turn certainly did rob writers of his ilk of their widely acknowledged status as *the* authoritative interpreters of anthroposophy (Ravagli, 2007).

The harsh inner-anthroposophical reception of Zander's magnum opus was undoubtedly also motivated by negative comments in the mainstream press that seemed to bear out the traditionalists' concerns. Discussing Steiner's racism in the *Spiegel* in September 2007 in light of the concurrent

examination of two volumes of Steiner's complete works by a safeguarding board (on which more later), Per Hinrichs laid into Steiner's harsh treatment of doubters. It seemed all the more galling, he suggested, in light of the fact that the "patron saint of the Waldorf movement" had

not even come up with his fantastical visions himself but was, in fact, a shameless plagiarist. Berlin-based historian Helmut Zander recently published the first comprehensive study of anthroposophy. His conclusion after 1800 pages: Steiner picked and mixed from various contemporary esoteric authors to create his own *mélange*.

(Hinrichs, 2007)

Grappling with the Problem of Racism and Racists in Anthroposophy and Waldorf Pedagogy

Hinrichs enlisted Zander primarily as an expert on the issue of Steiner's racism, quoting Zander's statement that "Steiner's racial theory is woven into the fabric of his works; these were not incidental lapses" (Hinrichs, 2007). A recurrent source of controversy since the 1990s, the debate surrounding Steiner's racism had flared up again the previous year (cf. Bierl, 2005; Husmann, 2010, pp. 317–342, pp. 353–356; Martins, 2012, pp. 11–20; Martins, 2022, pp. 571–585). While Steiner was an avowed humanist, he had adopted from theosophy a hierarchical conception of human races as agents of cosmic progression. Each race was assigned a mission at a specific developmental stage. Now was the age of white Europeans in general and the German spirit in particular, which, as Steiner saw it, embodied the pinnacle of human promise. This conception was integral to a metaphysics of global evolution characterised by an organicist spiritual imagery and notions of progress and regression, of ascent and decadence.

Following the publications of his magnum opus, Zander, who had commented on the issue on several earlier occasions (cf., for example, Zander, 2001), arguably became the expert most likely to be consulted by journalists on the issue of Steiner's racism. His seven-page treatment of the topic in the book concluded with yet another diplomatic vein.

If by racism one means the crediting of currently existing races with important anthropological traits, whether biologically or spiritually defined, then one can call Steiner a racist. Those anthroposophists who would have us believe that this is simply a polemical claim would do well to acknowledge that it is, in fact, based on a contextualising interpretation of the historical material. Conversely, Steiner also sought to constrain the deterministic implications of this conception, and all too many critics would do well to acknowledge that Steiner did not want to be a racist. It is for this reason that I would rather speak not of racism but simply of Steiner's theory of race.

(Zander, 2007, p. 636)

Putting the Finger in the Wound: The Intervention of Andreas Lichte

It was also in 2007 that Waldorf schools first attempted, hesitantly enough, to distance themselves from Steiner's racism. As so often, it fell to a renegade, in this case, Andreas Lichte, to get the ball rolling. Lichte had published an incisive account in 2004 of what he encountered as an intern at the Waldorf teacher-training seminar in Berlin. It bore the subtitle, "The Experiences of an Intern Who Has Made His Escape". A kind of diary in which he wrote about himself in the third person, this was the first of a number of critical treatments of the issue he has published since, for example, in 2012/2013, on the *Ruhrbarone* blog and, since 2019, in the avowedly atheist *Humanistischer Pressedienst* [Humanist Press Service]. Steiner's racism has been one of his key concerns throughout. His account of a week-long geography module at the Berlin seminar is a case in point. It hinged on a juxtaposition of Central and Eastern Asia, on the one hand, and North America, on the other, contrasting the Asians' ethereal orientation towards the heavens – expressed architecturally by the pagoda – to the gravitas of the pre-Columbian indigenous peoples' attachment to the earth, supposedly expressed architecturally by the step pyramid. Confronted with this typology,

L. takes the liberty of asking: "So what does this mean for the North American Indians – for pueblo architecture? Or the tent of the Plains Indians?" "They are insignificant in the grand scheme of things; the Indians were already a *race in terminal decline*", is the lecturer's response. "What do you mean by a *race in terminal decline*? That the white settlers displaced the Indians from their ancestral habitat?" "No, the Indians were already a *race in terminal decline*; they lacked the prerequisites to progress to a more advanced level of cultural attainment". None of the trainees say anything. Recalling his trip to the Western United States, L. can barely contain himself: "Don't you think it's unfair to add insult to injury by blaming the Indians for all the injustices they have endured?!" "Why are you so outraged? After all, the ancient Egyptians were a *race in terminal decline*, too". L. is lost for words: "Say that about the ancient Egyptians, if you must, but I don't want to tell an Indian hitching a ride with me that he belongs to a *race in terminal decline*!"

(Lichte, 2004, July 1)

What Lichte had to say was hardly surprising. There are plenty of racist, nationalist and "Nordic" tropes in the corpus of 20th-century anthropological and Waldorf literature (cf. Zander, 2001; Bierl, 2005; Husmann, 2010; Staudenmaier, 2014; Martins, 2012, 2022), and typologies rooted in cultural geography continue to reverberate in Waldorf education. The annual Waldorf Congress held in the Baltic city of Greifswald in 2007, to give an example, took place under the programmatic motto, "Reality and Idea – Goethe's Approach to the World Against the Spiritual Backdrop of the North".

Giving the inaugural address in the city's cathedral, the General Secretary of the *Anthroposophical Society*, Hartwig Schiller, told the 1,200 attendees that Greifswald was "Europe's navel" (Malcher, 2007, p. 30; cf. Schiller, 2008).

While many Waldorf parents and even numerous teachers seem to be genuinely unaware of these resonances, apologists routinely claim that Steiner's incriminated statements merely appear to be racist because they are taken out of context:

We occasionally read in the press, or it was raised with us, that there were racist aspects to Waldorf pedagogy; just because a century or so ago, Mr. Steiner once blathered something about "negroes" and "root races". When I asked around [at the Waldorf school], few knew any more about it, which confirmed my assumption that such utterances must have been taken completely out of context.

(Thome, 2008, p. 79)

The Unrequited Love of Andreas Molau

While many who attend or run Waldorf schools or send their children there may be unaware of Steiner's problematic blathering, it has consistently attracted the attention of *völkisch* activists and theorists. One example was Andreas Molau, who held influential positions in three far-right parties, including, initially, the NPD, a relatively small neo-Nazi party that was able to secure seats in two state parliaments earlier this century (cf. Speit, 2008, December 28). Before embarking on his political career in 2004, he taught history at the Waldorf School in Brunswick for eight years (cf. Bierl, 2005, p. 9; Lichte, 2012, August 7; Staudenmaier, 2014, pp. 320–322). He very publicly turned his back on far-right activism in 2012 (cf. Gensing, 2012, July 30).

Why the school had not checked his CV, why nobody had noticed anything until he outed himself, what to do about his children who were enrolled at the school, and, far from least, whether perhaps there was an aspect to anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy that offered men like Molau a ready point of contact, were all questions that gave rise to disagreement and were never truly resolved, leaving the Waldorf School in Brunswick with a burdensome legacy for years to come (cf. Speit, 2018, April 2).

Molau himself certainly did not feel alienated from the Waldorf project and, in 2007, applied to use the Waldorf brand for a residential facility for short-term teaching modules (Landschulheim) he intended to establish in rural Brandenburg. Aghast, the BdFWS took him to court, and he eventually agreed not to use the name. Not only was 2007 the year in which Zander sought to usurp the role of anthroposophy's public face, then, according to Ravagli, it "might also go down in the history of Waldorf education as the year in which the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools* had to defend itself legally against the plan of a leading member of the NPD to abuse the name of Waldorf education" (Ravagli, 2007, p. 28).

And yet, Ravagli had since decided that a particularly effective means of dispelling the suspicion that anthroposophy was in any way compatible with *völkisch* ideology would be the publication of an exchange of letters between him and none other than Molau, *Falsche Propheten. Anthroposophie und völkisches Denken. Eine Abgrenzung in Form eines Briefwechsels* [False Prophets. Anthroposophy and Völkisch Thought. An Epistolary Delineation]. It was scheduled to come out in time for the Frankfurt Bookfair in the autumn of 2007 (to this day, there is a record for the planned publication on the German Amazon site) – i.e., three years after Molau had embarked on his new career in the NPD – but at the last moment Ravagli withdrew his consent. As he told the middlebrow weekly *Stern*, this decision was owed to the fact that “the public would currently view a book co-authored with a card-carrying far-right author in the wrong context”. He clarified, however, that “It was and is important to me not to dismiss right-wing ideologues out of hand” (Christ & Pfohl, 2007, November 16).

As it turned out, the executive committee of the BdFWS had, in any case, viewed the book project with some skepticism (cf. Christ, 2007). Not that any of this made it into the section on Waldorf critics and their activities in Ravagli’s (2007) annual report for 2007. Ultimately, the Molau case was treated above all as a reputational risk rather than an opportunity to explore the factors that continue to make Waldorf pedagogy attractive to some on the far right.

Steiner Before the German Safeguarding Review Board and the Stuttgart Declaration

There was yet another respect in which Ravagli thought that the year 2007 “might go down in the history of the Waldorf movement”, namely “as the year in which a national quasi-governmental authority identified ‘racist elements from today’s point of view’ in two volumes of Rudolf Steiner’s complete works” (Ravagli, 2007, p. 28; the volumes in question were vols. 107 and 121). The authority in question was the *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* (BPjM) [Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons], acting on a referral submitted by the *Ministry for Family Affairs* (run by the Christian Democrats at the time) on 21st December 2006. The ministry, in turn, had been alerted to the problem by two evaluations of Steiner’s relevant writings submitted by Lichte and Jana Husman, respectively. Husmann is a cultural studies scholar who went on to complete a doctoral thesis on the symbolism of black and white in the context of Steiner’s ambivalent racial conceptions (cf. Husmann, 2010) that also offers a detailed account of the relevant debates presented here and documents a substantial cross-section of the press coverage at the time. In the evaluation she submitted to the ministry, she not only analysed Steiner’s own racial concepts but also demonstrated their significance for a

book by another anthroposophical author, Ernst Uehli (1936), that the BPjM had classified as racist seven years earlier (cf. Bierl, 2005, pp. 19–20).

On 29th January 2007, the BPjM informed the Steiner estate based in Dornach (Switzerland) about the proceedings. The estate responded on 23rd April, calling for the proceedings to be terminated. The process dragged on until September, as the anthroposophical movement set out to ensure that the two books in question did not end up on the index for racism. The response submitted by the estate (a document strikingly reminiscent of Ravagli's style and vocabulary) concluded that the racial typologies presented by Steiner in general and in the two books in particular were unobjectionable and simply reflected a form of higher humanism. The educationalist Harm Paschen, the BdFWS and Zander submitted additional evaluations (cf. Zander, 2001). The twelve-member BPjM panel met again on 6th September 2007 with representatives of the anthroposophical movement. On this occasion, the latter also submitted a treatise Ravagli had co-authored earlier, *Rassenideale sind der Niedergang der Menschheit* [Racial Ideals are Humanity's Downfall] (cf. Bader & Ravagli, 2002).

The BPjM was not persuaded and concluded that both books contained "passages that, from today's perspective, amount to racial discrimination insofar as the author, on the basis of physical characteristics, assigns different levels of attainment to individuals depending on their ethnic extraction" (BPjM, 2007, p. 6). To be sure, Waldorf schools did not use the two books in question. Even so, Waldorf pupils "might very well develop an interest in the works of the founder and namesake of their school" and feel encouraged to adopt his views, given the status he enjoyed within the Waldorf movement as a revered authority figure (BPjM, 2007, p. 8). The BPjM nevertheless stopped short of placing the books on the index because the Rudolf Steiner publishing house promised to produce, within a year, appropriately annotated new editions of the volumes in question and a corresponding "critical supplement" for dissemination with the "remaining copies of the current edition" (BPjM, 2007). As the *Humanistische Pressedienst* reported in November 2008 under the heading "Bundesprüfstelle an der Nase herumgeführt" [The Federal Review Board Taken for a Ride], the old volumes were still in circulation at the time – without the promised supplement (Schedel, 2008, November 21). In August 2010 did the publisher's website list both volumes as out of print, promising new editions for earlier (!) that year (cf. Husmann, 2010, p. 325). When the new editions came out in 2011 and 2017, the annotation had indeed changed but did not have anything critical to say about Steiner's racism.

The Waldorf establishment ridiculed the BPjM's suggestion that Waldorf pupils might seek out Steiner's works. Polemically, Ravagli asked: "Has anyone ever heard of a tenth or eleventh-grader who has read *Die Mission einzelner Volksseelen* [The Mission of Individual Ethnic Souls] (GA 121)?" Moreover, even if he did, "all he would learn from these lectures is that all 'peoples' and 'races' are called upon to sacrifice their supreme level of attainment on the altar of human development" (Ravagli, 2007, p. 28). This line

of argument studiously ignored the crucial fact that Steiner assigned different levels of possible attainment to the different “races”.

Needless to say, Waldorf pupils also see or hear the news and/or read newspapers. Alarmed by the BPjM proceedings, some of them did take a look at the incriminated volumes. When they subsequently approached their teachers with questions, some of them were met with absolute helplessness or a wall of silence. While one may be concerned about the indoctrination of Waldorf pupils, there is an important flipside to this concern. The more the validity of Waldorf pedagogy’s increasingly folklorised anthroposophical underpinnings is simply taken for granted, the less Waldorf staff is actually able to respond in any meaningful way to pupils’ perfectly harmless and even well-meaning questions about anthroposophy. A form of complacency has developed that, paradoxically, cuts pupils off from the very religious/spiritual resources to which the schools are meant to offer them access.

It soon became clear that Ravagli’s radical rejectionism failed to convince not only the BPjM but also the public at large and that the BdFWS would need to develop a more pragmatic approach to the controversy. While Ravagli continued to work for *Erziehungskunst* and was subsequently able to shore up his status with his book-length assault (Ravagli, 2009) on Zander’s (2007) magnum opus, it fell to the BdFWS press officer and board member Henning Kullak-Ublick to inaugurate a new approach. Although he, too, initially inclined towards the conventional defence that Steiner’s seemingly troubling utterances had merely been “taken out of context” (Christ, 2007, November 16), it was he, above all, who then pushed through the so-called *Stuttgarter Erklärung* [Stuttgart Declaration], which the BdFWS adopted at its general meeting on 28th October 2007.

The statement drew a clear line between the Waldorf movement and far-right appropriations of anthroposophy and expressed its determination to anathematise, as had supposedly been its intention since its inception, “discriminatory tendencies” of any kind. Indeed: “Anthroposophy as the basis of Waldorf education is directed against any form of racism and nationalism” (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2007). Of course, it is hard to see how the declaration might reasonably have claimed anything else. It was the following sentence that, in a way perhaps not immediately obvious to readers less familiar with the debate, amounted to something of a revolution: “The Waldorf schools are aware of the fact that the corpus of Rudolf Steiner’s works contains isolated formulations that, by today’s standards, do not tally with this basic orientation and seem discriminatory” (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2007). When the declaration was presented to the press on 9th November 2007, tempers flared when Lichte and Husmann criticised that the chosen formulations were still reminiscent of the defensive “taken out of context” approach (Christ, 2007).

Even so, never before had the Waldorf movement admitted that Steiner’s works did contain racialising passages that now seem troubling. The *Stuttgart Declaration* was, therefore, able to defuse the debate about Steiner’s racism for the time being (Frielingsdorf, 2012, p. 70). Initially conceived as a response to

the BPjM proceedings, it has since developed a life of its own. It functions as an important point of reference for Waldorf initiatives targeting far-right activists, and precisely because it is so formulaic, the anti-racist credo has stood Waldorf schools in good stead in conflicts with the ever-growing number of far-right sympathisers. The philosopher Caroline Sommerfeld is a case in point. As a result of her far-right activism, her children were suspended from a Waldorf school in Vienna. She then set herself in the scene, rather effectively, as a victim of all-pervasive leftist bullying (cf. Weiß, 2019, February 3) and published a counter-declaration to the Vienna Declaration, the Austrian equivalent to the, as she saw it, politically correct *Stuttgart Declaration*. Her counter-declaration was published, *inter alia*, on the blog of one Lorenzo Ravagli, who, in the meantime, had himself moved even further to the right (cf. Sommerfeld, 2017, August 30).

Kullak-Ublick continued to exert considerable influence on Waldorf's internal policies and public profile until the beginning of the Corona pandemic, and in this time, the schools went further than ever in stamping out far-right activism in their own rows, for example, by sacking teachers affiliated with the so-called *Reichsbürger* movement (i.e., far-right activists who do not recognise the authority of the current German state and consider themselves citizens of the German Reich that was defeated in 1945). It bears stressing, however, that, all this notwithstanding, Waldorf literature that critically explores the impact of racial theory on the Waldorf curriculum remains a rarity (cf., for example, Zech, 2016).

Testing a Different Form of Redress: The Criminal Complaint

In the wake of the BPjM's decision, Waldorf critics tested a different form of redress. In late September 2007, Samuel Althof, one of the founding members of the Swiss *Aktion Kinder des Holocaust* [Children of the Holocaust Campaign Group] and an established expert on far-right extremism, lodged a criminal complaint pertaining to volume 32 of Steiner's complete works, which, despite containing an antisemitic essay, had been reissued without any kind of contextualising annotation in 2004. Once again, the anthroposophical establishment initially resorted to radical apologetics. The director of the Steiner archive, Walter Kugler, told the *7 vor 7* television programme broadcast by *Telebasel* that he did not consider the "utterances" in question "to be antisemitic at all, what they are, they are critical of Jews, which must surely be permitted, otherwise, we would no longer be allowed to engage in any kind of criticism" (quoted in Husmann, 2010, p. 325). In addition, in October, Michael Grandt, a long-standing Waldorf critic of mixed repute, lodged two similar complaints with the German police, one against the volume in question and another against Kugler for his statements on the *7 vor 7* programme. A decade earlier, Grandt and his brother, Guido Brandt, had published the *Schwarzbuch Anthroposophie. Rudolf Steiners okkult-rassistische Weltanschauung* [The Black Book of Anthroposophy. Rudolf

Steiner's Occult-Racist Worldview] (Grandt & Grandt, 1997). Although the BdFWS, which took out an injunction against the circulation of the book, ultimately failed in its attempt to have it banned, the publisher stopped selling it when it was required by the court to redact the existing copies. While this hardly reflects well on the BdFWS, Grandt's portrayal of Waldorf education and his conspiracy-mythical insinuation that anthroposophists engaged in sexual magic and satanism clearly displayed a "blatant lack of seriousness" (Zander, 2007, p. 1361).

Perhaps because it feared the possible outcome of the proceedings (all three complaints were eventually dismissed), or perhaps because it decided the reputational damage was too great regardless of the outcome, the Steiner estate soon decided it needed to defuse the conflict and, in late November, its president, Cornelius Bohlen, announced that the current version of volume 32 would be withdrawn from distribution pending the publication of a new, critically annotated edition (Werner, 2007, November 29). Clearly, a pattern was emerging. Grandt seized on the opportunity to publish yet another, similarly sensationalist and poorly researched black book, "Schwarzbuch Waldorf" (2008), that sucked up much of the oxygen in the ensuing debate. So successful was this endeavour that few people now recall (if they ever knew) that this lawfare campaign was launched not by Grandt but by Althof. Conversely, by taking Grandt to court yet again, the BdFWS only drew additional attention to his critique and prolonged the pain.

The Frankfurt Memorandum

A further critical initiative in the wake of the BPjM decision was the creation of the so-called *Frankfurter Memorandum* [Frankfurt Memorandum]. It was initiated by Jens Heisterkamp, the editor of *info3*, and Ramon Brüll, the head of the *Info3* publishing house. At the time, the *Info3* milieu was engaged in a remarkably unorthodox form of Steiner reception (cf. Martins, 2023, pp. 69–73), abandoning the theosophical legacy of higher worlds and the law of cycles, which, in turn, meant that Steiner's racial conceptions no longer served any discernible purpose. In March 2008, Brüll and Heisterkamp published a draft memorandum detailing Steiner's racist and anti-Jewish statements and calling for further debate and the development of appropriate guidelines for the future publication of Steiner's works. The draft was supported by a significant number of prominent anthroposophical signatories (cf. Brüll & Heisterkamp, 2008a, p. 4).

The feedback was well-nigh universally negative. Some felt that the draft went too far, others that it did not go far enough, some acknowledged that there was a problem but argued that it was not suited for public debate, and in light of all the criticism, most of the signatories clarified that they had really meant to support only the process but not the text of the draft (cf. Brüll & Heisterkamp, 2008b, pp. 16–17; Geuenich, 2009, p. 132; Husmann,

2010, p. 328). In *Erziehungskunst*, the initiative was subjected to savage ridicule (cf. Zander, 2019, p. 201). In the end, Brüll and Heisterkamp simply published the final, revised version of the *Frankfurter Memorandum* (Brüll & Heisterkamp, 2008b) as a personal contribution. Notwithstanding its institutional failure, the memorandum has nevertheless become an important and credible point of reference for anthroposophical authors.

Crisis Averted: The Aestheticisation of Anthroposophy

It was by no means all bad news for the anthroposophists, however. The film *Abenteuer Anthroposophie* [Adventure Anthroposophy] by Rüdiger Sünner, an independent filmmaker best known in Germany for a documentary on Nazi occultism, is a case in point for the support the movement received when faced with the pesky criticism charted in this chapter. “As a filmmaker”, Sünner explained,

I am interested in spiritual topics and have witnessed Steiner’s recent reception in Germany both with astonishment and dismay. What astonishes and dismays me is the one-sided focus on issues such as racism and antisemitism, as well as the predominantly negative assessment of the esoteric dimension of Steiner’s doctrine.

(Sünner, 2008, p. 4; cf. Sünner, 2017, pp. 138–178)

Much of the film consists of footage from Waldorf schools, both in Germany and Namibia, that offers a detailed portrait of everyday life in the schools and the teachers’ self-understanding.

Rather than traces of racist pedagogy, Sünner could find only anti-racist project work (cf. Sünner, 2017, p. 156).

None too surprisingly, the anthroposophical reception of Sünner’s film was generally enthusiastic. “Where the film achieves genuine depth”, one reviewer wrote, “the spiritual connection is palpable”. There was only one blemish, really: Sünner had interviewed Zander about “accusations of racism” (Rehbein, 2008, p. 77). As Sünner (2008, p. 6) saw it, Steiner, like other prominent philosophers, scientists and artists – such as Luther, Voltaire, Goethe, Kant, Marx, Richard Wagner and C. G. Jung – had made problematic statements that lent him an “aura of ambivalence”. The same held true of Benn, Jünger and Heidegger, who had even “temporarily supported the Nazis”. Yet no one, he claimed, would suggest that this ambivalence in any way detracted from their achievements as philosophers, scientists and artists.

Sünner’s Steiner is not a clairvoyant but a storyteller whose treasure trove of tales one is at liberty to cannibalise as one sees fit. In short, Sünner’s Steiner is an esotericist but no anthroposophist. While Sünner did not bother with Steiner’s Christology, he had time for Blavatsky’s input and the dark splendour of her mythical advanced ancient civilisations. For Sünner, anthroposophy was all about mythological imagery and a holistic approach

to nature. Speaking to the leftist daily *taz*, Süner lamented the prevalent, merely pragmatic approach to the conservation of nature, which suggested “that we need to protect nature” simply “so we have somewhere we can go for a walk” (Eberhardt, 2008, October 18). The detailed review in the *taz* gives a clear indication of the reception the film enjoyed far beyond the anthroposophical core audience.

Süner’s aestheticisation of Steiner turned out to be the anticipation of a new trend. In 2010, the *Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg* presented two major Steiner shows, one of which, *Rudolf Steiner and Contemporary Art*, was also shown by the *Kunstmuseum Stuttgart* the following year (cf. Zander, 2011). As the chief curator, Markus Brüderlin, told Germany’s most prestigious conservative daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), “Steiner does not belong to the anthroposophists alone”. Stripped of his doctrinal gravitas, the new Steiner certainly appealed to FAZ author Oliver Jungen. Portraying Steiner’s complete works as a millstone around the prophet’s neck, he explained Steiner himself “cared about his texts only in the moment; he even refused to check transcripts”. The thousands of lectures he gave “were never meant to form this corpus of works that now constrains the engagement of Steiner like a leaden yoke”. What Steiner exuded was “really something like occult stand-up, a form of ultra-late-romanticist slam poetry: it took the form of science but was actually a mystery play and *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art]” (Jungen, 2010, May 18).

In the end, none of the initiatives, controversies and scandals discussed in this chapter were able to diminish the reputation of the Waldorf movement in any meaningful way. Indeed, its general appeal increased further in subsequent years, notably against the backdrop of the 150th anniversary of Steiner’s birth in 2011, and the number of schools and pupils has been increasing continuously ever since. Ravagli’s melodramatic encirclement narrative of 2007 turned out to be utterly unfounded. So dire did he consider the movement’s prospects to be at the time that nothing short of a reference to the Nazis could apparently illustrate the magnitude of the threat. *Völkisch* forces had begun to assail Steiner in 1908, and the Nazis eventually banned the *Anthroposophical Society* in 1938. “Will it perhaps take another thirty years or so from today”, Ravagli asked suggestively, “until we have reached that point again?” (Ravagli, 2007, p. 28). In the event, none of the barbarians at the gates – neither the supporters who veered too far to the right nor the leftists who would censor the word of the prophet or the historians who sought to usurp the prerogative to speak authoritatively about the movement – were able to do Waldorf pedagogy any serious harm.

In reality, as we saw, the Waldorf movement made substantial gains in the period in question. The twofold empirical turn (Barz & Randoll, 2007; Zander, 2007) allowed it to gain a foothold in mainstream humanities and education programmes. The creation of a cottage industry engaged in the empirical evaluation of continuity and change within the established Waldorf system has successfully curtailed more radical reform initiatives. Waldorf teacher training was

restructured to secure state accreditation. Criticism of Steiner's racism, finally, has ultimately proved ineffectual, and the Waldorf establishment has been able to shrug it off with a minimum of concessions – or so it seemed until the Covid pandemic when all the balls were thrown back up in the air again.

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3 Mind the Gap – New Players Are Taking the Stage. Waldorf Education in the German Academic and Public Discourse

Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann

Germany is the cradle of Waldorf education. Nowhere are more Waldorf schools than here. The *Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen* [Association of Free Waldorf Schools] (BdFWS), the holder of the rights to the name and trademark for Steiner’s education, is the umbrella organisation for more than 250 schools currently. In addition, there are almost 600 Waldorf kindergartens, 220 curative education institutions and almost 40 – mainly part-time – seminars and colleges for Waldorf education, i.e., mainly the training of teachers (BdFWS, n.d.; Vereinigung der Waldorfkindergärten e.V., n.d.; Anthropoi, n.d.). The founding of the *University of Witten/Herdecke* in 1982, the first private university in Germany, marks the beginning of the institutionalisation and academisation of anthroposophy and its fields of practice that continues to this day. By now, the range of courses at four universities – in addition to Waldorf education, (curative) eurythmy and medicine – also includes architecture, business administration, art, management, psychology and social data science (Alanus University, n.d.a; UWH, n.d.a). The state accreditation of the privately funded universities took place in 2005 for the *University of Witten/Herdecke* (UWH) and in 2010 for the *Alanus University of Art and Society*; the latter was founded in 1973 as an independent art study institution. In the most recent ranking by the *Centre for Higher Education Development* (CHE), both universities even achieved top rankings in student satisfaction, depending on the subject. “Waldorf works” seems to be the general perception of many parents and educators, or at least it does no harm, according to those who associate it primarily with arts and crafts classes and a “cuddly education”. Waldorf education in Germany – the fairytale rise of an alternative education? Not quite. Over the last 100+ years, the success story of Rudolf Steiner’s education has been tarnished time and time again, be it by a scandalisation of racism in his writings (Schneyink, 2023, January 9), conspiracy theorists or right-wing individuals in school communities (N.N., 2015, January 24), (almost) bankrupt universities (N.N., 2010, May 17; Zander, 2015, pp. 116–117) or school closures due to the insufficient qualification of teachers (Kalscheur, 2023, April 28) and “serious deficiencies in teaching” (WDR, 2022, September 27). While surprisingly, but relatively consistently, few (critical) voices can be heard from educational science when

it comes to the normative and anthropological basic ideas of this pedagogy as well as its practical consequences, the public perception of Steiner's educational theory has certainly changed in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic and called new players onto the scene.

This essay is an attempt to outline the reception of and the debate about Waldorf education in German (educational) science and the public over the past 20 years on the basis of three case studies. It will be shown that 1. the void in educational research has been filled by anthroposophical players, especially those who follow a pragmatic-scientific reading of Steiner, 2. a change of perspective within the debate on Waldorf education has taken place during the pandemic, according to which Waldorf schools are regarded as an anthroposophical field of practice, a socio-political player and thus the object of public criticism more than ever before, and 3. the changed media discourse has opened up a new public sphere and new spaces of discourse, especially by and for those "affected" and interested.

Waldorf Education: A Research Desideratum as Door Opener

When I approached an established professor of general education with the proposal to examine Rudolf Steiner's concept of intellectuality and its significance for Waldorf education in my Bachelor's thesis, it was rejected on the grounds that Waldorf education and, in particular, Steiner, who lent his ideas, were "not satisfactory from an educational science perspective". Now, I was subsequently able to write the paper on the previously mentioned topic at another chair, and this is merely an individual experience. Nevertheless, this aptly illustrates the relationship between educational science and Waldorf education. After all, Waldorf education has been met with only marginal interest by educational science – especially in the last ten to 20 years – while at the same time, the research gap thus created has been increasingly and purposefully filled by anthroposophical representatives of Waldorf education, who, for their part, are attempting to present and establish themselves as scientific actors both within the field of Waldorf education and (educational) science as a whole.

An important marker for the importance attached to Waldorf education (in educational science) can be seen in the discourse in specialist journals. For the present case study, 12 German journals from the field of educational science over the period between 2000 and 2022 were examined on the basis of the keywords "Steiner" – as its founder – and "Waldorf" – as a constitutive name element of his pedagogy (see Figure 3.1).¹

1 The following journals were reviewed and corresponding finds included in the sample: *Bildung und Erziehung* (via search engine Digizeitschrift; 2000–2022, nine hits), *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung* (complete issues from beginning 2006–2022; from 3/2021 only tables of contents, three hits), *Erziehungswissenschaft – Mitteilungsblatt der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft (DGfE)* (complete issues from 2011–2022, one hit), *Erziehungswissenschaftliche Revue* (tables of contents from 2002–2022, five hits), *Journal für*

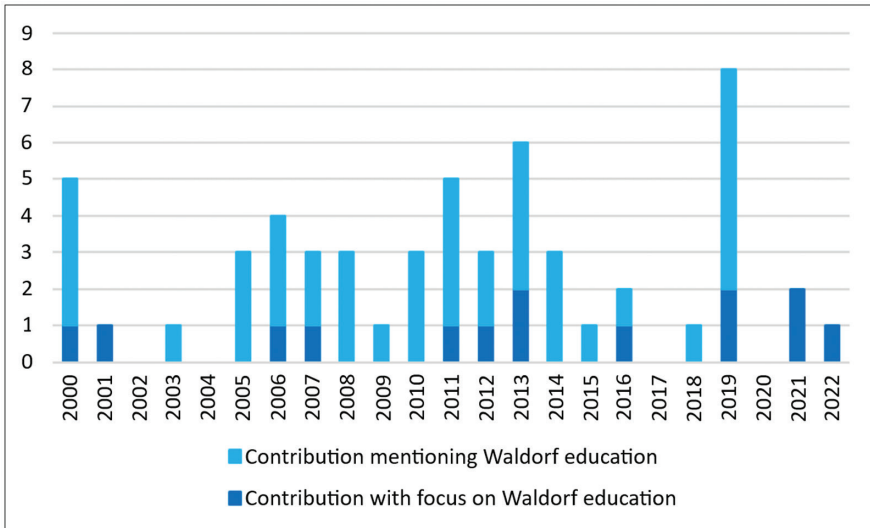


Figure 3.1 How often and where the keywords “Steiner” and “Waldorf” were found in the 12 educational journals studied from 2000–2022.

This keyword analysis resulted in a total of 57 references, 30 of which were in articles, 13 in bibliographies of new publications, 12 in reviews and two in other formats such as obituaries. Only 20% of the articles focused on Waldorf education, and a third of these were written by authors who are associated with either the *Alanus University*, the *Pädagogische Forschungsstelle* [Pedagogical Research Center] und *Freie Hochschule Stuttgart* [Free University Stuttgart] – which emerged from the first teacher training courses in 1919 and is now a state-recognised university – or a Waldorf school in the field of anthroposophy. Thematically, both of the contributions that are mainly devoted to Waldorf education and those that merely mention it are in the context of reform education (five hits) or the private school system (five hits), deal with the training and competencies of teachers (four hits) or, to a lesser extent, with features that characterise the educational concept in more detail, such as art/creativity (two hits) or foreign language teaching (two hits). In this respect, one can’t speak of

LehrerInnenbildung (complete issues from beginning 2009–2022, no hits), *Pädagogik* (tables of contents from 2000–2022, one hit), *Pädagogische Korrespondenz* (tables of contents from 2009–2022, no hits), *Pädagogische Rundschau* (tables of contents from 2000–2022, five hits), *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (tables of contents from 2000–2022, no hits), *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* (complete issues from 2000–2023, 28 hits), *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (annual index, i.e. all titles and indices from 2001–2022, four hits), *Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation* [*Journal for the Sociology of Education and Socialisation*] (annual index from the beginning 2013–2022, one hit).

a genuine reception of the Waldorf pedagogical idea or practice but rather of a marginal notice owed to the scientific aspiration of completeness, as evidenced in particular by the high proportion of references in bibliographies and (collective) reviews. In view of their low representation (four of 66 authors in the sample), authors close to anthroposophy can hardly be regarded as a part of the established community of educational sciences.

A look at the publications of specialised publishing houses corroborates and expands this impression. Also, using the keywords “Steiner” and “Waldorf”, the complete directories of ten relevant academic publishers² were searched, and hits were included in the study sample if they dealt mainly or in at least one chapter with Waldorf education (see Figure 3.2). For the research period between 2000 and 2022, this resulted in 62 publications.

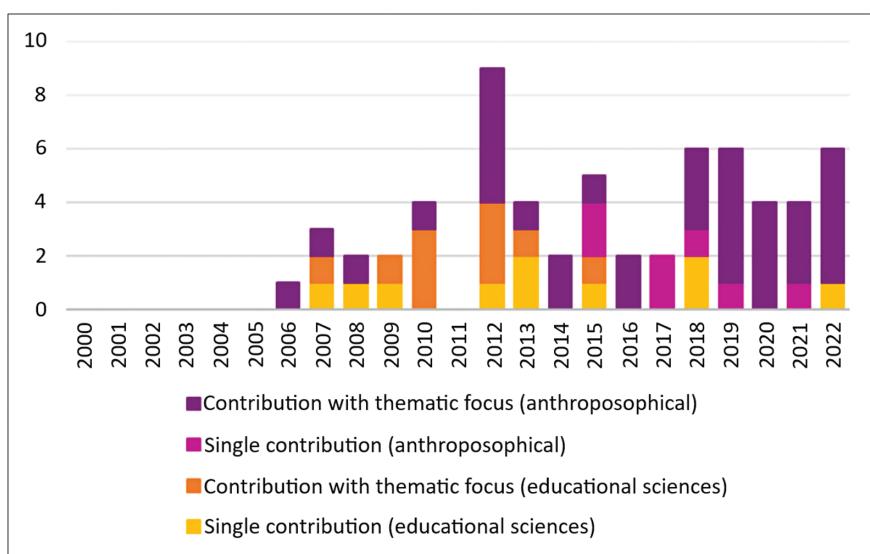


Figure 3.2 Locations of the keywords “Steiner” and “Waldorf” related to Waldorf education in the ten academic publishers studied from 2000–2022.³

2 The following publishers’ directories were reviewed and corresponding finds included in the sample: *Barbara Budrich* (six hits, only category “education” considered), *Beltz* (19 hits), *Brill* (three hits), *Klinkhardt* (five hits, three of them identical with UTB due to cooperation, no double counting), *Peter Lang* (14 hits), *Schöningh* (see *Brill*, since 2017 joint publishing group), *Springer* (12 hits, only German-language results considered), *UTB* (four hits), *Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht* (no hits, only from the field of religious studies), *Waxmann* (three hits).

3 The extent to which the increased public interest in Waldorf education is also reflected in educational science has not been determined yet, due to the lengthy publication practice and duration. The lack of visibility of educational scientists in current debates, however, continues to reveal a research gap here.

Of 259 participating authors, only 56, i.e., slightly more than 20% of those published here, are employed at state universities and research institutes, mainly in educational science but also occasionally in (foreign) language and mathematical-scientific didactics, philosophy and psychology, and sometimes medicine. Those who have undertaken research on Waldorf education in the field of educational science, in particular, work in the sub-disciplines of (general) educational science, school education and educational research. Most of the publications have been written by Wolfgang Nieke (general education, *University of Rostock*), Heiner Barz (educational research, *University of Düsseldorf*), who is close to anthroposophy and above all, Heiner Ullrich (School Education, *University of Mainz*), who was acknowledged in 2022 in the *Erziehungskunst* as someone whose criticism was serious and painful, but also “healing”, in order to “look at all too familiar sectarian tendencies in the anthroposophical movement and overcome a naive abstinence of science”.⁴ With an average of one or two corresponding smaller publication formats such as individual articles, Waldorf education is merely a sideshow for most authors in educational science; between Klaus Prange’s *Erziehung zur Anthroposophie* [Education to Anthroposophy], last published in its third edition in 2000 (first in 1985), and the last major educational science publication by Heiner Ullrich in 2015 (*Waldorfpädagogik. Eine kritische Einführung* [Waldorf Education. A critical Introduction]), there was only a brief peak phase of publications between 2007 and 2012, most of which, in turn, used an empirical approach.⁵ Indeed, in his preface to the graduate study (Barz & Randall, 2007a), Ullrich noted an intensification “of the scientific discourse on Waldorf education”, yet described its development along the “three long familiar paths of anthroposophical self-assurance, the glorification of reform-pedagogical practice and ideological critique” (Ullrich, 2007, p. 11). The fact that “prominent Waldorf teachers have entered

4 The evaluation refers to the contributors whereby several contributions by one author in one publication were only counted once; editorships were not considered separately.

On Ullrich, it literally said: “A confrontation with them [Ansgar Martins, Heiner Ullrich, Helmut Zander, author’s note], a productive discourse, is possible and helps to look at all too familiar sectarian tendencies in the anthroposophical movement and to overcome a naive abstinence of science” (Schieren, 2022, p. 6).

5 On the double empirical turn, see Martins (2023) in this volume. The fact that “Waldorf” as an educational institution and practice evokes more interest in educational science than its founder, Rudolf Steiner, who gave it its ideas, can also be corroborated by the topics of academic dissertations and habilitations throughout the years. Between 1945 and 2009, only nine dissertations list Steiner as a subject in their titles; he thus “only” ranks 23rd among the most frequently mentioned persons in educational doctoral theses (Kauder, 2014, p. 203). Adding together dissertations and habilitations – as reported annually by the *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* – there was only one work on Steiner between 2010 and 2022; in the same period, however, nine works dealt with Waldorf education, three of which were presented at the *Alanus University*, which has had the right to award doctorates since 2010 (Alanus University, n.d.b).

into dialogue with educational scientists with ambitions for school reform” through an empirical approach has, in his view, “led to a more productive form of encounter with Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogy” (Ullrich, 2007, p. 11), even though eight years later he once again had to state that Waldorf education was “[n]ot unjustly . . . repeatedly qualified as noteworthy practice and dubious theory at the same time” in educational science (Ullrich, 2015, p. 173).

This gap in research remained neither undiscovered nor unused. The publication series *Cultural Studies Contributions of the Alanus School of Art and Society*, edited and initiated by Marcelo da Veiga at Peter Lang publishing house – in which the “results of its interdisciplinary research activities in the fields of pedagogy, educational science, philosophy and contemporary art practice” are presented and “impulses of the anthroposophical spiritual science founded by Rudolf Steiner on daily practice are critically reflected and evaluated” – marks, in a sense, the entry of anthroposophy into the world of specialist publishing (Peter Lang, n.d.). With the first publication of this series in 2006 and especially since 2012, the number of anthroposophical publications has increased significantly and dominated the field of Waldorf education research since 2016 at the latest. The last attempt at communication between established educational science and anthroposophical research was initiated in 2010 by the Bielefeld educational scientist Harm Paschen with his reader *Erziehungswissenschaftliche Zugänge zur Waldorfpädagogik* [Educational Science Approaches to Waldorf Education] published by Springer VS (Paschen, 2010a) – without, however, having any apparent, lasting effect. His reasons for looking for these (educational) scientific approaches were the Waldorf school’s own teacher training, including the associated accreditation procedures for modules or courses of study and entire universities, and specifically the “state’s introduction of new forms of study and examination (Bologna Process) as well as a new concentration of Waldorf-critical attacks on teacher training” (Paschen, 2010b, p. 11). The authors were selected according to two criteria: “theoretically and practically familiar with Waldorf pedagogical content and academically trained” (Paschen, 2010b, p. 12), which led, in consequence, to the majority of authors being affiliated with anthroposophical institutions.

Paschen, who died in 2022 and was active as a parent in Waldorf institutions and used to be on the training board of the BdFWS, among others, was acknowledged in an obituary in *Erziehungskunst* as “one of the pioneers of building bridges between academic educational science and Waldorf educational art” (Zdražil, 2022), but the paths he paved have hardly been trodden by professional colleagues. Furthermore, even on the anthroposophical side, despite publications such as Volker Frielingsdorf’s monograph *Waldorfpädagogik in der Erziehungswissenschaft* [Waldorf Education in Educational Science] from 2012 and the *Handbuch Waldorfpädagogik und Erziehungswissenschaft* [Handbook Waldorf Education and Educational Science] by Jost Schieren from 2016 (both published by Beltz), considering the authors almost exclusively at least lean towards anthroposophy, one can

speak more of a self-reflective engagement and self-assurance of a specific group of Steiner adepts than of a dialogue between Waldorf education and educational science. This is because the series and the publications mentioned are exemplary for the advance of an anthroposophical, self-conceived “scientific” approach to Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogy, which is apparently trying to establish itself in the general scientific discourse by entering the publication lists of relevant scientific publishing houses.⁶

The anthroposophical and anthroposophy-related publications come from 20 people who are affiliated with the *Freie Hochschule* or the *Pedagogical Research Center Stuttgart*,⁷ from around 15 practitioners from various Waldorf schools and kindergartens and the majority from researchers at the *Alanus University*, who, being 50 authors, already constitute almost 20% of the contributors. Waldorf education is – obviously – their main research focus, with Dirk Randoll, who died in 2021 – Professor of Educational Science with an emphasis on empirical educational and social research – and Jost Schieren – Professor of School Education with a focus on Waldorf education – among others, being responsible for a very large number of publications. At the *Alanus University of Applied Sciences*, where both of them are or were active, the attribute “anthroposophical” was specifically omitted in a funding application in 2015 for a Waldorf education professorship for the purpose of state accreditation, as anthroposophy is not understood as a confession but “a science or a methodical path of knowledge” (Redaktion Erziehungskunst, 2015). The establishment of this professorship, the “Professorship of Philosophy and the Theoretic Principles of Anthroposophy; probably indeed the first with such a denomination directly related to anthroposophy”, is considered remarkable by its holder Wolf-Ulrich Klünker

with regard to the genuine scientific nature of anthroposophy, because it expresses the fact that anthroposophy as a part of humanities can enter directly – i.e., without any ideological prerequisites – into scientific discourse. This is how Rudolf Steiner ultimately understood anthroposophy; however, due to current events at that time, he was actually involved in questions of worldview. This historically contingent debate needs no longer to concern us – except as the historical context of the emergence of anthroposophy.

(Redaktion Erziehungskunst, 2015)

6 A look at those publications that are entirely devoted to Waldorf education shows that the content focuses on the specifics of Waldorf education, the training, competencies and the role of teachers, graduates and the scientific-theoretical or disciplinary approach; in the individual essays, discussions of the teachers predominate.

7 It is important to note the high proportion of those who have at least interim dual affiliations, particularly between *Alanus University*, the *Freie Hochschule Stuttgart* and the *Pedagogical Research Center* as well as Waldorf school practice; these were only counted once in each case. In addition, about 30% of all contributing authors are not institutionally affiliated at all, presumably because they are less involved in science than in (school) pedagogical practice.

In the debate about the scientific nature of anthroposophy, which continues to this day, Schieren – who is also Dean of the Faculty of Education at the *Alanus University* – highlights as a central conflict that Steiner’s spiritual science was indeed concerned with observations, i.e., empiricism, but in its reference to metaphysics, the spiritual, and it transcends the boundaries of natural science (Schieren, 2015a, pp. 130–131). Contrary to previous attempts by the anthroposophical side to show science and anthroposophy as compatible via an expanded concept of science or negotiations in the context of esoteric research or as precisely incompatible through a “dismissal of contemporary science and anthroposophical internal orientation”, he advocates for “treating anthroposophy itself scientifically and making it an object of scientific discussion”, for which it is essential to develop “a different understanding of anthroposophy that is precisely not characterised by a dogmatically narrowed form of consciousness and metaphysical faith, but rather follows a more phenomenological approach in recourse to Steiner’s early work” (Schieren, 2015a, pp. 130–133). The aim here is the “scientific substantiation and validation” of anthroposophy (Schieren, 2022, p. 8). Again and again, Schieren emphasises that anthroposophy – especially with regard to its significance for Waldorf education – should not be understood as content, but as a method, as a heuristic (Schieren, 2015a, pp. 135–136; Schieren, 2015b, 2022). Ullrich (2015, p. 173) also states that “more and more attempts are being made to translate the cognitive, aesthetic and ethical content of Waldorf education from the anthroposophical-spiritual sphere into the secular terminology of educational science”. He rejects as outdated the “massive ideological influence on Waldorf education at the personal (teacher’s attitude), content (curriculum) and methodological-didactic (idea of man) levels” that Ullrich has identified:

He is probably right where faithful and somewhat overzealous Waldorf educators use the Waldorf school as a space for the realisation of their esoteric longings and world healing mission. However, this species is becoming less and less common. Admittedly, there was and still is a rather dogmatically oriented understanding of anthroposophy, which continues to have an unbridled effect in some circles But, the categorical scientific orientation of Waldorf education is currently no longer questioned by significant representatives of Waldorf schools.

(Schieren, 2015b, p. 105)

This pragmatic approach of anthroposophy in its relation to Waldorf education is, however, by no means as unambiguous or hegemonic as Schieren claims. In a series of articles in the *Goetheanum* on this very question, Tomáš Zdražil, Professor of Anthropological and Anthroposophical Principles of Waldorf Education at the *Stuttgart School of Spiritual Science*, explains that anthroposophical contents such as cosmology, angels, karma and reincarnation, which are disqualified as esoteric, are very much of significance for

Steiner and especially Waldorf practitioners (Zdražil, 2023a). He also refers critically to the *Erziehungskunst*, because even there, one sees oneself as having “currently arrived at the establishment of Waldorf pedagogy in a ‘post-Steiner era’” (Zdražil, 2023a).

The scientific orientation of *Alanus University* is now being further promoted, among other things, through the founding of the *Waldorf Graduate College*. In the course of its own research forum in 2022, the college even presented its work at a congress of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft* [German Society for Educational Science] (DGfE) on the topic of “Research in the Context of Waldorf Education and Educational Science” (Graduierten Kolleg, n.d.). In addition to Schieren’s self-assessment that science-oriented Waldorf education (research) has become established within anthroposophy, it can be stated that its representatives are increasingly establishing themselves in the field of educational science after a long period of effort. And this not only, as has been shown, by filling the research gap with their own content and interpretations through the placement of their own research in renowned publishing houses. The constantly expanding Waldorf education research, which does not discard the premises on the anthroposophical study of man and epistemology inspired by Steiner but covers them up as “heuristics”, seems to be gradually gaining acceptance in the educational science community through its primarily empirical research.⁸

From Model Student to Problem Child? The Changing Public Discourse

The discrepancy between a positive assessment of Waldorf educational practice and scepticism towards the theory of anthroposophy behind it – additionally combined with widespread ignorance of the latter – also seems to characterise the reception in public (media). Already, in the course of the 100th anniversary of Waldorf schools, celebrated at Berlin Tempodrom, there was critical reporting in print media and public television that described a turning away of Waldorf education from Steiner as necessary – however, in the “Waldorf circles”, this media criticism had only arrived during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Zdražil, 2023b). From this moment on, at the latest, Waldorf education was more frequently, or at all, decidedly named as an anthroposophical field of practice, criticism multiplied and the increasing reporting, in turn, sparked a new dynamic of criticism and its defence.

The public reputation and reception, to which the self-representation of Waldorf educational actors of different provenance contributes or tries to

⁸ In the summer of 2023, for example, an international symposium, organised by the *Alanus University* (Mannheim location) in cooperation with the *Phenomenological Vignette and Anecdote Research Network* at the *University of Vienna*, was advertised via the DGfE mailing list.

contribute, is of constitutive importance because, as private schools and due to their high claim to autonomy, they require the initiative of parents in their founding as well as self-administration (cf. Zech, 2016).⁹ Their continued existence is thus dependent on the one hand on the school community reproducing itself, i.e., graduates and teachers also sending their own children to Waldorf schools (cf. Barz & Randoll, 2007b, pp. 17–18; Koolmann & Ehrler, 2017), and this form of school also being in demand beyond this group of people. On the other hand, besides the mere number of teachers and pupils, it is also about their attitudes towards Waldorf education and, not least, towards anthroposophy as a constitutive part of Waldorf pedagogy's principles. So who is demanding Waldorf schools because of, and who despite of, the anthroposophical background, and what does this mean for its continued existence (cf. Koolmann & Ehrler, 2017; Ullrich, 2015; Randoll, 2013)?

For the assessment of the societal role of Waldorf schools during the pandemic proposed here, media reports from national daily newspapers of various political spectrums¹⁰ with the highest circulation, as well as public radio and television stations¹¹ – each available online – were searched for the keyword “Waldorf education” for the period March 2020 to May 2022 (58 hits). In addition, press releases from the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools* with reference to the Covid-19 pandemic served as an internal anthroposophical perspective (11 hits).

In 70% of the reports analysed from a non-anthroposophical perspective, Waldorf education is connected to anthroposophy; in just under 60%, the latter is classified as a social player. Within their milieu, the representatives of the Waldorf school associations are perceived as anthroposophical players in the narrower sense. The FAZ stated:

Anthroposophical thinking has seeped deep into the collective consciousness of left-wing alternative and liberal-bourgeois milieus over decades. This results in a great sympathy for the problem-solving competence of civil society and a fundamental scepticism towards state institutions and the leading media as well as towards what is perceived as the social mainstream.

(Holl & Soldt, 2021, December 4)

⁹ Against this background, the question arises to what extent the far-reaching and – as far as can be seen – uncommented restriction of access rights to *Erziehungskunst* during the summer of 2023 is a reaction to the increasing criticism or corresponds with other reasons. Until now, all issues from 1919 onwards could be freely viewed and downloaded online. Now, only articles from 2009 onwards are individually accessible, and current issues are only available three months after publication (Erziehungskunst, n.d.a, n.d.b).

¹⁰ FAZ, *Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche*, *taz*, *Zeit*.

¹¹ ARD, BR, HR, MDR, NDR, *Radio Bremen*, RBB, SR, SWR, WDR, ZDF.

Whether it is actually the specifics of anthroposophical forms of thought with their “spiritual-scientific” foundations that pass into the collective consciousness, or above all, their translation into practices of everyday life and the values associated with them, may be left open for the time being. What must be noted is the impact on their social sphere of influence through their anthroposophically based actions. The fact that the scope for action is determined by existing social structures is shown, among other things, by the references to the “pietistic will for self-determination . . . in the Alpine region” (Michael Blume, quoted in Achermann et al., 2021, March 21), which served as fertile ground for anthroposophy, and thus even for the self-proclaimed “Querdenker” – as the opponents of the measures called themselves during the pandemic. Thus, according to taz (2020, December 9), “it is no coincidence that the initiative ‘Querdenken’ has its starting point in Stuttgart, the stronghold of anti-vaxxers, anthroposophy and Waldorf education, which have by now become an esoteric superpower” – a statement that places Waldorf education ideally and politically close to the political right and at the same time attests to its high effectiveness through anthroposophy. The latter is also exemplified by *Der Spiegel* (Höhne, 2020, September 2), which comments on the praise of Winfried Kretschmann, the Green Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, that Waldorf schools are an “educational feat” by saying that anthroposophy “enabled the Greens in the southwest to gain access to bourgeois circles early on”. Describing Waldorf schools as anthroposophical and socially effective players may sound banal, and yet it is exceedingly remarkable, since in the past reporting on, for example, measles outbreaks in Waldorf schools has been different and mostly completely devoid of anthroposophical framing (cf. Hackenbroch, 2013, September 29).

In the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, resistance to hygiene measures such as forged mask certificates in schools, refusal to vaccinate or the participation of Waldorf teachers in demonstrations by, i.e., the so-called “Querdenker”, were the reason for media coverage, often with reference to milieu-specific values and an individualistic, liberal lifestyle. The proximity to conspiracy theories also caused a stir. Especially since the sociological approach to the protests against Covid-19 measures by Nachtwey et al. (2020; see also Frei et al., 2021), the players and events of the “Waldorf milieu” have been interpreted in a more ideological-political way. The study came to the conclusion that “esotericism and anthroposophy . . . play a role that should not be underestimated”, based on an overall high rejection of (state) authorities and vaccinations as well as an endorsement of alternative medicine and holistic-spiritual thinking (Frei et al., 2021, p. 252). In particular, the media picked up on the opposition of Waldorf teachers and parents to hygiene measures and compulsory vaccination, as well as the proximity to conspiracy theories, and related these to an unspecified esotericism to which anthroposophy also belonged. To put it bluntly, within the public discourse about Waldorf schools and members of the school association, their relationship between the individual and the state was brought into focus, and

its political implications were thematised and problematised. The actions of these players gained relevance for society as a whole at the latest with the discussion about the vaccination quota. *Der Spiegel*, for example, dared to make the following accusation: “Nowhere in Western Europe is the vaccination rate as low as in the German-speaking countries. This is also due to an influential group: the anthroposophists” (Rapp, 2021, November 15; cf. also Sadigh, 2021, November 24).

Contrary to this was the self-positioning of the Waldorf schools, represented by the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools* and representatives of school-based and academic Waldorf education. They rarely even mentioned anthroposophy and only made loose connections. A possibility of social impact was negated with reference to the size of the school association when, as an example, Schieren stressed that the “about 250 Waldorf schools and around 90,000 Waldorf pupils” in Germany were “now really not a strong fraction” (Sadigh, 2021, November 24). This formalistic argumentation limits the sphere of influence of Waldorf education to its own institutional boundaries. This role attribution is also reinforced in a statement by the BdFWS board regarding the decidedly pedagogical claim that the BdFWS “[acts] in the pedagogical field and . . . [does not] give recommendations on medical questions” (BdFWS, 2020).¹² Ideological-political readings were firmly rejected (Luig, 2020, July 7). Starting with the first statement in October 2020, particular emphasis was placed on its own guiding principle of an education to freedom:

The BdFWS exists in order to actively represent and defend education to freedom in the world and to enable the free partner institutions that join it to practically realise this goal. . . . Education to freedom means enabling young people to make their own judgements without bias, to be able to consider the consequences of their actions and to have the common good and the freedom of their fellow human beings in mind.
(BdFW, 2020)

The freest development of the individual possible in interaction with others was consequently put forward as a prerequisite for social responsibility and the common good against the accusation of an individualistic and, thus, precisely irresponsible approach to preventive measures and the pandemic. In the subsequent press releases and interviews, freedom is also spelled out by anthroposophical players with pedagogical keywords such as child

12 This position not only masks the anthroposophical understanding of a “holistic healing education”, in which pedagogy and medicine are inseparably intertwined via the common basis of anthroposophical anthropology, it is also not true that they remain solely on pedagogical terrain in their work, considering the BdFWS elsewhere hosted discussion events with representatives of “holistic medicine” whose explicitly anthroposophical stance moreover remained unnamed (BdFWS, 2021b; Gesundheit aktiv e.V., 2019).

development, trust, encounter, power of judgement and imagination, initially promising a high level of discursive connectivity – anthroposophical figures of justification were presumably deliberately not mentioned. For as Zdražil (2023b) points out, Steiner already measured his words according to whether he was dealing with Waldorf educators, an interested pedagogical public or a broader public, and all the more so in times of social media and the internet, restraint and renunciation were called for in anthroposophical content and topics, after all, “no questions should be answered that have not been asked”, otherwise “one damages the cause of anthroposophy itself” with all too missionary-dogmatic enthusiasm (Zdražil, 2023b).

If a position on non-genuinely pedagogical issues is unavoidable, as in the case of compulsory vaccination, reference is made to the individualistic way of life of the members or “followers”, as exemplified by Jost Schieren in *Die Zeit*:

But this is not an ideological problem of anthroposophy, but a sociological one that affects many free schools. . . . Parents who send their children to free schools are usually more non-conformist, more liberal and less state-oriented. Many pursue an individual, alternative lifestyle. This is also true of many teachers.

(Sadigh, 2021, November 24)

Such recourses to lifestyle, which are characterised by anti-authoritarian, individualistic, specifically liberal values, circumvents an ideological-political positioning – and thus criticism. *Lebensformen* [lifeforms], understood as “complexly structured bundles (or ensembles) of social practices directed at solving problems that are themselves historically contextualised and normatively constituted”, are commonly outside criticism since “[t]he political order of the liberal state of law . . . accordingly presents itself as an attempt to organise this coexistence [of different lifeforms] in a way that is neutral with regard to ways of life” (Jaeggi, 2014, pp. 9, 21–22, 58).

From a non-anthroposophical perspective, by contrast, individual life and consumption decisions are interpreted more politically against the background of the pandemic; the sociologist Nadine Frei speaks of a “‘libertarian understanding of freedom’ of anti-vaccinationists. . . . ‘This is also a motivation of parents who send their children to Waldorf schools: the self-determined structure’” (Jakob, 2021, December 20). In addition, many pandemic containment measures and especially vaccination campaigns are not aimed at the individual but always at the general public, and in this context, two-thirds of Germans were in favour of more restrictions in the private sphere – i.e., the individual renunciation in favour of the common good – anyway. A highly affective polarisation, ergo a strongly negative evaluation of those opposed to measures, comes to be, especially on the part of those in favour of restrictions (RAPID-COVID, 2021, pp. 5–6). This holds potential for tension not only between Waldorf schools and society as a whole but also within them when the pandemic turns “them [into] a battlefield” (Moulin, 2021, April 10).

Not only the BdFWS but also anthroposophical journals such as *Info3* tried to counteract both by firmly rejecting any political interpretation of pedagogy and anthroposophy – they saw themselves as having come under unjustified criticism as part of a “campaign” implying coordination and intention (Dehmelt, 2022; most recently, e.g., Zdražil, 2023a) and rhetorically turned the tables by using the virulent term “fake news” and speaking of a “wave of false reports” in which “Waldorf schools [were staged] as supposed scapegoats” (BdFWS, 2021a). This was because a study on the Covid-19 protests, which was published in the first report at the end of 2020 and again in 2021 and which identified the anthroposophical milieu as one also being involved, led to a renewed accumulation of media reports. From the end of 2022, it became apparent that this changed view of Waldorf education as part of anthroposophy was also having a lasting effect. After a documentary titled *Anthroposophie – gut oder böse?* [Anthroposophy – good or dangerous?] (ZDF, 2022a) broadcast that autumn, an episode of the satirical journalistic late-night show *ZDF Magazin Royale* (ZDF, 2022b) and a six-part, detailed *Waldorf report* by the online magazine *Krautreporter* (Krautreporter, 2022) appeared after months of joint research by the journalists, on topics including teacher training, funding and anthroposophical foundations, but also existing power structures and how to deal with critics. In particular, Jan Böhmermann’s late-night show¹³ generated widespread public awareness. While it succeeded – unsurprisingly – in presenting all kinds of bizarre examples from the Waldorf world and making them look absurd or ridiculous, a glance at relevant comment sections shows that its reception seemed quite ambivalent. For those who were not satisfied with just mockery, the bizarreness of what was presented seemed to be an expression of deliberate exaggeration and a – possibly even dishonestly distorting – one-sided representation of what Waldorf education is all about. As a defensive reaction, the anthroposophical side accused them of one-sidedness and even defamation. By contrast, the multi-part report on anthroposophical fields of practice by Frank Seibert at the beginning of 2023 (SWR, 2023) attempted to approach the subject more openly, at least superficially, and contrasted the statements of critics with those of practitioners and representatives of anthroposophical institutions and also allowed them to speak for themselves.

On the side close to anthroposophy, various modes of reception of the media criticism of the anthroposophical basis of Waldorf education are emerging. One response was a 1.5-hour “informative video” in which Markus Fiedler, a Waldorf teacher in Oldenburg until his suspension in the summer of 2020, and Dirk

13 Among others, André Sebastiani, a teacher and author of a critical introduction to Waldorf education, and Oliver Rautenberg, a prominent critic of anthroposophy, had their say in the programme. I myself contributed the educational science perspective and, in a short statement, pointed out the lack of research on the concrete influence of anthroposophy on everyday school life.

Pohlmann, a documentary filmmaker in public television until 2016, constructed an alleged conspiracy by Böhmermann, *Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften* [Society for the scientific research on parascience] (GWUP) and the *Amadeu Antonio Foundation*, and which received around 15,000 clicks and several hundred mostly sympathetic comments within the first three days alone (Wikihausen, 2023, January 31). Another different response came from the actually rather liberal anthroposophical magazine *Info3* (Dehmelt, 2022), which, with regard to the blogger Oliver Rautenberg, stated a radicalisation of critical rhetoric, but reproduced it itself by using relevant terms such as “thought police” and portraying anthroposophy as an “ideological minority” and thus implicitly a victim that was only concerned with containing “materialistic natural science”. In the educational magazine *Erziehungskunst*, the victim narrative was again used with the image of a “medieval witch hunt” by the mainstream against “fringe groups”: just like past accusations of racism and antisemitism, the current criticism of the proximity of Waldorf practitioners to “Querdenken” etc. allegedly also served to – falsely – denigrate anthroposophy and its fields of practice as right-wing (Schieren, 2022). This was followed by a critique of the critic(s); their contents are ignored.

At the same time, there are also increasing voices within anthroposophy talking about renewal, anti-racism, decolonisation, diversity and its implementation in the present curriculum and everyday life. The title of the delegates’ conference in January 2023 – *Is this still Waldorf or can it go?* (Lohmann, 2023) – may be indicative of this, although further inspection shows that it is by no means a matter of turning away from Steiner as the founder of the Waldorf school and his knowledge of higher worlds, but rather a return to the roots. In addition, as a reaction to the media criticism, the concept of worldview is being reinterpreted: on the occasion of *Didacta* 2023, Europe’s largest education fair, the press release of the BdFWS (2023) stated: “Courage for more worldview – in the sense of a pluralistic, democratic society. This could be the conclusion of a panel discussion at the didacta education fair on the current documentary ‘ARD Wissen, Frank Seibert in der Waldorfschule’”. With the attempt to appropriate the concept of worldview and thus to cast the accusations in a positive light, new paths of self-presentation are being taken here, and the anthroposophical offer of meaning and interpretation of a value-guided education is being marketed by its representatives and practitioners.¹⁴ And in view of the continuing growth of the Waldorf community, these offers seem to be in demand. The question of which needs and criticisms of social conditions are reflected

14 At the same time, this can be seen as an attempt to contain the “uncertainty of many Waldorf school communities with regard to anthroposophy and Waldorf education”, which results from the “critical climate” of the public, which meets increasingly heterogeneous Waldorf colleges and a growing lack of knowledge of Steiner’s writings among members of the school communities (Zdražil, 2023a).

in this demand is much more important than the question of how much anthroposophy there is in Waldorf education and the like.

New Actors, New Debates: “Ex-Waldis” Taking the Stage

The broad reception of the ideological background of Waldorf education and other fields of practice acted as a catalyst for former Waldorf students or parents to share their own – especially negative – experiences.¹⁵ In the years before, a non-scientific and yet public discussion of Waldorf education and anthroposophy by non- or ex-anthroposophists had taken place, in addition to corresponding groups on social media, primarily via individual blogs, which function independently of institutionalised discourse practices and at the same time are able to influence public debates (Fraas & Barczok, 2006). The *Waldorf blog* by the philosopher of religion Ansgar Martins, which was maintained from 2009 to around 2017 and then continued in a reduced form via the Facebook page of the same name, should be mentioned here. In rather personal contributions, this blog aimed to “address topics that are neglected in the Waldorf public sphere or are discussed controversially, viewed one-sidedly or glossed over or suppressed in the public debate about Waldorf education” and also offered space for guest contributions and counter-arguments (Waldorfblog, n.d.). The *Anthroposophie.blog*¹⁶ by Oliver Rautenberg now has a much wider reach. The “anthroblogger”, as he calls himself, has been active since 2013, and with his countless researches on anthroposophy in the past and present, its fields of practice and protagonists, he has now gained more than 32,000 followers on Twitter/X and a Grimme Online Award nomination in the category “Education and Knowledge” in 2021.¹⁷ He sees himself as a necessary counter-voice to the “one-sided and false-positive self-portrayal of anthroposophists”, because, he writes: “Scientific-critical thinking is on the retreat. Esotericism and conspiracy myths are increasing. There are thousands of pastel-coloured internet sites full of the beautiful lies of anthroposophy”. Time and again, following his tweets, blog entries or guest contributions in various newspapers, he is met with libel suits from anthroposophists (see, among others, Rautenberg, 2023, February 22), which in turn generate debates about how anthroposophists deal with

15 In February 2023, *Stern* magazine introduced a Waldorf teacher’s account of her experiences with the provocative words: “At the latest since Böhmermann’s contribution on Waldorf schools, there is no stopping them. Former Waldorf pupils unpack and one story after the other comes to light: racial ideology, front-of-class teaching, black pedagogy and much more is addressed” (Hoch, 2023, February, 21).

16 Rautenberg (n.d.). *Anthroposophie.blog*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230901162639/https://anthroposophie.home.blog/> (memento from 2023, September 1).

17 “The Grimme Online Award sees itself as a quality prize for online journalism and awards prizes to German-language online offerings aimed at the general public” (Grimme Institut, n.d.a, n.d.b).

criticism (Freiwald & Bender, 2022); anthroposophical disputes with criticism of Steiner’s ideas often focus primarily on his person.¹⁸

Apart from the blogs, Twitter/X, in particular, is used by former or current members of the Waldorf community under the significant hashtags #anthrometoo and #exwaldi¹⁹ at the same time as a forum for the (anonymous) exchange of experiences and a platform for public discussion. Podcasts, which form the data basis for this third case study, can be seen as another medium that fulfils these two functions, among others. This form of audio reports and contributions enables low-threshold participation even on the major platforms while at the same time having a potentially high reach, reaching young people in particular (48.7% of 14–29 year-olds and 36.7% of 30–49 year-olds) and those with a higher level of education (41.6%) (Statista, 2022a, 2022b). Podcasts – the medium par excellence during the pandemic – are mainly used to inform people about previously unknown topics and are characterised by a special form of intimacy between podcasters and users (Wiethe et al., 2020). A look at the Spotify media library²⁰ shows that, with the pandemic, this medium was also used to talk about Waldorf education more frequently and more intensively. A keyword search using the terms “Waldorf education” and “Waldorf school” yielded 58 individual episodes – three-quarters of which were created after the start of the pandemic in March 2020 – and nine podcasts that focussed on the topic and started between autumn 2020 and spring 2023.²¹

With 29% (17 hits), most episodes fall into the category “criticism”²² in which mostly former Waldorf students, practitioners critical of anthroposophy in the field of education – such as the teacher André Sebastiani – or bloggers and journalists – such as Oliver Rautenberg and Bent Freiwald – have their say in predominantly dialogue formats. In addition, there are episodes that inform about historical circumstances or current events in the context of the Waldorf school movement (eight hits) and mainly come from the area of public broadcasters. Together, the categories “criticism” and “information” are those in which Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy are

18 In 2023, a blog called *Anthro-Diskurs* was briefly online, where anthroposophists associated with the *Institute for Social Threefolding* and the *University of Witten-Herdecke* pretended to classify current critiques, but mainly provided information about critics of anthroposophy (Rautenberg, 2023, August 2).

19 Under #anthrometoo especially, those experiences are shared that relate to negative experiences in general and abuses of power, bullying and the like. #exwaldi is used more generally to mark one’s own perspective as a former Waldorf student. A systematic analysis of the Twitter data cannot be done at this point.

20 At 50.2%, Spotify is the most-used podcast platform, ahead of YouTube (40.6%), Amazon Music (20.4%) and the audio libraries of *ARD* and *Deutschlandradio* (18.5%) (Statista, 2022c).

21 All hits up to and including June 2023 were included.

22 The categories were developed inductively and are based on self-reported information about the format and content of the episodes and podcasts as a whole, as well as the content negotiated in them.

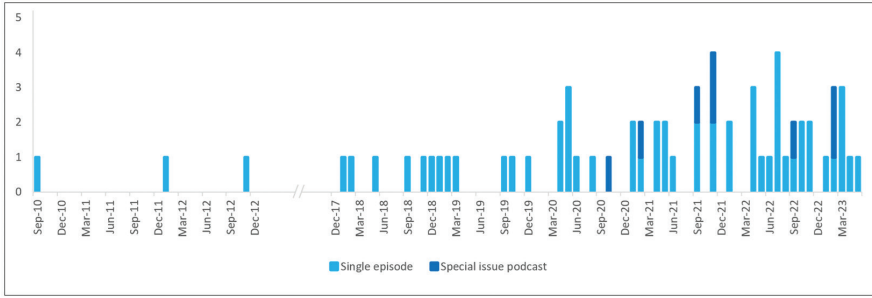


Figure 3.3 Number of individual episodes and focus podcasts on the topic of Waldorf education on Spotify by June 2023.

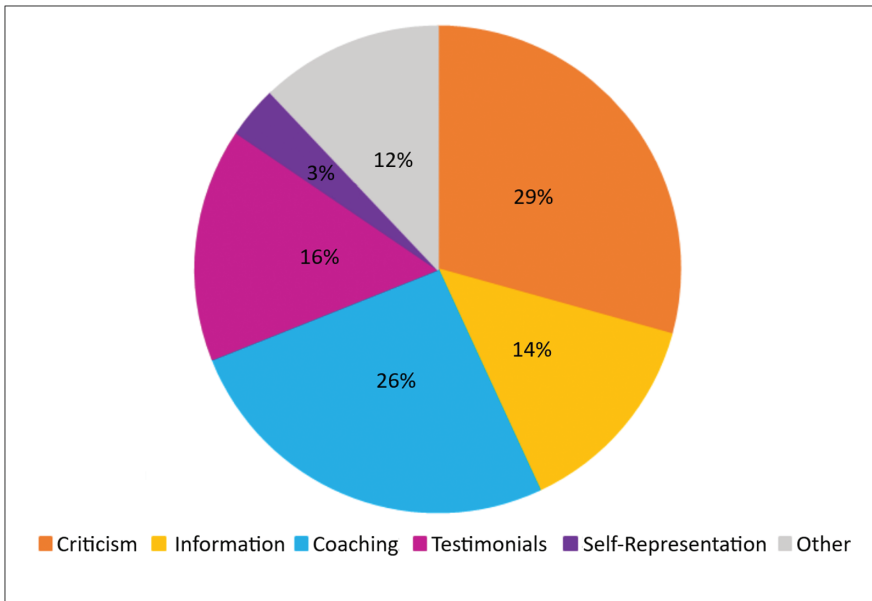


Figure 3.4 Individual episodes by category.

mentioned most often explicitly and already in the description. Consultation formats (15 hits), in turn, represent the second most frequent category; here, parents as potential “consumers” or self-appointed coaches with sometimes high expectations of effect (Barz & Randoll, 2007b, p. 13) talk to Waldorf practitioners or Waldorf parents about education, family and lifestyle and about the advantages of Waldorf education. Other episodes are reports on experiences (nine hits) and, to a lesser extent, self-reports by anthroposophists (two hits). Wherever Waldorf education is discussed, the main focus is either on questions about its practical benefits and normative

content in the search for the right education and way of life or on the exchange, reflection and (critical) examination of one's own world of experience as a (former) member of a Waldorf community (whether as a pupil, parent or teacher). Established journalistic formats or similar hardly speak out here, but all the more people with their own Waldorf biography do – whether critically or positively. It is also noticeable that experts from the educational field are primarily invited from the educational practice; an educational science counterpart to the representatives of Waldorf institutions or universities is missing. When researchers are guests on the podcasts and express their criticism, they tend to be from the fields of history, religion, social or natural sciences.

Among the nine podcasts that focus on Waldorf education, *waldorflernt – Gegenwart hören, Zukunft gestalten* [Waldorf is learning – Listening to the Present, Shaping the Future]²³ is the most comprehensive, with 48 episodes. The cooperation project of *elewa-eLearning Waldorf e.V.* and the *Pedagogical Research Center* at the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools* was launched in September 2021 and, according to its own information, includes “conversations with educators” on the challenges and possibilities of “healthy and sustainable educational offers”; practitioners and anthroposophical scientists such as Michael Zech and Ulrike Barth have their say. Anthroposophy finds almost no mention in the detailed episode descriptions, but in addition to school pedagogical evergreens such as media education, child development and parental work, current trend topics include decolonisation, resonance, climate neutrality, holism, transformation or queerness and diversity. Part of this podcast is also the format *#waldorflerntsexeducation*. There are repeated references to online courses on Rudolf Steiner's anthropology on elewa's own website *elearningwaldorf.de*. Also linked to anthroposophical institutions is the podcast *Anthroposophy to go*,²⁴ under the responsibility of Wolfgang Held, the communications officer at the *Goetheanum*. Five of the 11 episodes, which, according to the self-description, are intended as a “spiritual toolbox” and are assigned to the formats “self-help” and “knowledge”, are dedicated to the field of education. With *Kaffe, Kreide, Morgenspruch – der Waldorfpodcast* [Coffee, Chalk, Morning Sayings – the Waldorf Podcast],²⁵ there is also a format in which, between February 2021 and June 2023 alone, two Waldorf teachers report on their everyday school life in 23 episodes, presented since

23 N. N. (n.d.). *waldorflernt – Gegenwart hören, Zukunft gestalten*. <https://open.spotify.com/show/0utAhAjWll8ivEtGh3pAmM?si=d2ae71ba3c05484d&nd=1> (memento from 2023, September 2).

24 Held, W. (n.d.). *Anthroposophie to go*. <https://open.spotify.com/search/anthroposophie%20to%20go> (memento from 2023, September 2).

25 N. N. (n.d.). *Kaffe, Kreide, Morgenspruch – der Waldorfpodcast*. <https://open.spotify.com/show/1yujSDRREr7lhIDDjtHudf?si=b918b68e1e8f4a5e&nd=1> (memento from 2023, September 2).

October 2022 by the *Waldorf Shop*.²⁶ The programme is supplemented by guest appearances from the teaching staff, lecturers from the *Witten-Annen University of Applied Sciences* or representatives of the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools*. Considering the media criticism and the increased public interest in the events at Waldorf schools concerning hygiene measures and the like, it is hardly surprising that the episodes on the school year review (June 2021) and on the return to face-to-face teaching, of all things, contain a reference to the high degree of individuality of the individual schools and the lack of representativeness. In total, there are two podcasts from the category “self-representation” of anthroposophical institutions and four from the category “experience report” (all affirmative, one of them sponsored) in the period under study, which offered a positive counter-narrative to the ideological debates circulating in the media, directed towards pedagogical practice and effectiveness.

In contrast, there are two formats that take an explicitly critical approach to Waldorf education: the podcast *Ich schaue in die Welt* [I look into the world],²⁷ initiated by a former Waldorf student and published in five episodes between October and December 2020, and the *Waldorfsalat* podcast²⁸ by Oliver Rautenberg and a team of people who had biographical points of contact with anthroposophy through their school days in the Waldorf school, training in an anthroposophical farm or as part of the *Christengemeinschaft* [Christian community]. In this format, which began in September 2022 and has already been nominated for the *German Podcast Prize* (DPP, 2023) in the category of knowledge, the invited scholars and critical practitioners, moderated by Rautenberg, discuss with the podcast team the anthroposophical content of the various fields of practice, contrasting Steiner’s ideas and current anthroposophical positions with current research findings in the respective reference disciplines, with each episode accompanied by an extensive source apparatus. This format can be seen as remarkable and exemplary for the current state of public debate in that here, triggered by the media criticism of anthroposophy, individuals from this milieu have been irritated by their previous views of and experiences with this very philosophy and are now publicly working through, reflecting on and classifying them. Whereas previously, people like the “Anthroblogger” or the *Krautreporter* journalist Bent Freiwald were addressed and acted as mouthpieces, giving a voice to those who remain anonymous but still want to share their – here most often negative – experiences with others, the general climate now seems to be changing in such a way that those involved or affected themselves are raising their voices. Especially the episodes with “voices from the community”, in which voice messages sent in

26 Waldorfshop (n.d.). *Waldorfshop*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230902083312/www.waldorfshop.eu/> (memento from 2023, September 2).

27 Zisler, M. & Weiss, J. (n.d.). *I Look at the World*. <https://open.spotify.com/show/3euCQ5UwKtlcCNE3azQ2Ce> (memento from 2023, September 2).

28 Rautenberg, O. (n.d.). *Waldorf Salad Podcast*. <https://open.spotify.com/show/568vaU2D3bV4g6s5QHauGv> (memento from 2023, September 2).

by listeners are played and commented on, show that the critical discussion stimulates reflection on one's own experiences, starting from the question: How much of what they experienced had to do with anthroposophy – and what does that mean for their self-image and worldview, both positive and negative?

It can be assumed that not every form of public criticism triggers such open reflections, and that moralising or mocking arguments about Waldorf education and anthroposophy can even have the opposite effect. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that the high level of indifference towards Steiner and anthroposophy, especially on the part of pupils and parents, is due to the implicitness with which anthroposophy is (omni-) present in Waldorf schools. Moreover, since the ideally long time spent together at school and the embedding in a school community, and thus even in a way of life that goes beyond it, at the same time has a strong identity-forming effect (Ullrich, 2015, p. 153).²⁹ Nevertheless, the example of the *Waldorfsalat* podcast may make clear that a critical discussion about the nature and influence of anthroposophy is also significant “from below” – not least for Waldorf education itself. For up to now, under the credo “Waldorf works” (cf. among others Ullrich, 2015, p. 28; Barz & Randoll, 2007b), the anthroposophical worldview from which the practice is derived is at least tolerated, and sometimes even the (supposed) practical effectiveness is seen as proof of the truth of Steiner's higher insights – a figure of reasoning already used by Steiner himself. With the insights and contradictions of (former) pupils, the question of the anthroposophical content of educational practice in Waldorf schools – especially considering declining knowledge of and identification with anthroposophy on the part of teachers³⁰ – and its actual effectiveness could now be raised anew, and in higher numbers also reveal previous figures of justification as insufficient.

29 According to the graduate study by Barz and Randoll (2007b, p. 19), the relationship of former Waldorf pupils to anthroposophy is “indifferent or sceptical . . . The proportion of those who state that they are practising or committed anthroposophists decreases significantly across the three year groups”, and two-thirds cannot specify the ideas underlying the school (Liebenwein et al., 2012, pp. 10–11). Of the parents, only 11% chose the Waldorf school because of the anthroposophy, just under 50% because of the educational concept and just under 20% out of dissatisfaction with state schools (Barz & Randoll, 2007b, p. 16).

30 34% of the teachers describe their relationship to anthroposophy as “practising/committed”, 40% as “positively affirmative” and 22% have a “critical sympathy” towards it (Barz, 2013, p. 306). Just under 90% follow the Waldorf curriculum (cf. Barz, 2013, pp. 306–307; Graudenz, 2013, pp. 154–155); however, the number of those with a decidedly anthroposophical training is decreasing, with about 40% of teachers not Waldorf-qualified (Randoll, 2013, pp. 60–61).

Impressive Practice, Dubious Theory – and the Debate?

“Anthroposophy has never been as prominent as it is today”, Schieren (2022) cynically remarks in view of the increasingly critical public discussion about Waldorf education. This is certainly to be agreed with. On the basis of the three case studies on the reception and discussion of Waldorf education in the academic and public debate in Germany, clear shifts in discourse with their own ambivalences and specifics can be identified.

Apart from the critical work of Heiner Ullrich, who deals with the practice and the anthroposophical idea and its influence on Waldorf schools, the reception of Waldorf education in educational science is largely missing. Waldorf education can only be found in the margins of empirical research on other topics – e.g., private schools – or historical-systematic works – e.g., reform education. This research gap, in turn, offers the researchers of a Waldorf education or anthroposophy that is becoming more and more academic the opportunity to place their – in this case, pragmatically science-oriented – reading of Steiner’s pedagogy prominently, beyond their own publication organs, also in academic publishing houses. By framing anthroposophy as a method and heuristic rather than as content, this research not only evades the debate on worldviews but also shows itself capable of connecting with empirical educational research – and could, thus, after the attempts at dialogue in the 1990s and 2010s, offer a new terrain for a thoroughly promising rapprochement between Waldorf education and established educational science.

In the media debate, on the other hand, a change of perspective has taken place in the course of the pandemic, according to which Waldorf schools are more than ever classified as a practical field of anthroposophy and their “potential danger” for society as a whole is discussed under the question of the ideological content in education. Attempts at defence and counter-narratives, for example, by the *Association of Free Waldorf Schools*, which wanted to limit their reach to educational practice and the school community, seem to be less effective than the potpourri of alarmist, mocking and factually critical counter-voices raised in interviews, newspaper and television articles or newly emerging podcasts. These, in turn, are at the same time an indirect and direct irritation, reference and mouthpiece for many people who, away from the harmonistic Waldorf community idea, are beginning to reflect on their individual biographical experiences against the backdrop of the overarching anthroposophy and are beginning to question its effects on a different, very personal level. The power of discourse, hitherto organised hierarchically via the institutions and authority of the teachers, has been and is being increasingly broken up by this new internal as well as external public sphere and requires new answers to old questions and (supposed) certainties – for Waldorf education, but also for educational science. For the critique of both a worldview-driven – and also a “value-driven” – educational practice and supposedly ideology-free empiricism is, to quote Prange, “one of the contributions that a practical pedagogy striving for self-enlightenment may expect from educational science” (Prange, 2000, p. 198).

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4 Waldorf Education in the Netherlands

Anna van der Want, Sita de Kam, Kirsten Koppel, Wouter Modderkolk and Saskia Snickers

Introduction

Educational Context in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a Western European country with a population of 17 million people (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). What is unique in the Netherlands is that both public and non-public schools are fully financed by the Dutch government. Only a handful of schools are private schools (some of which are Waldorf schools) that are not funded by the state. The main reason mentioned by private Waldorf schools is that the concept of being private allows schools more freedom to be the school they want to be and, by doing so, provide the best environment for children's development without interference from the government (e.g., Staatsvrij Onderwijs, n.d.; Werfklas, n.d., Waldorfschool Zeevonk, n.d.).

For Waldorf schools, an important part of the Dutch constitution is “Article 23; Freedom of Education” (Ministry of Interior and Kingdom relations, 2019). This part of the Dutch law ensures the right for all people to establish schools according to their own religious or pedagogic educational convictions. There is no national curriculum in primary or secondary education, there are general learning outcomes and a standardised exam at the end of primary and secondary school. Each school is free to appoint teachers who accept the school's identity (ideals, tradition and beliefs) as long as they are qualified (at least a bachelor's degree in primary education and a bachelor's or master's in secondary education. The Dutch (governmental) Inspectorate of Education oversees the quality of education in all schools in the Netherlands.

Waldorf Education and Waldorf Teacher Education in the Netherlands

In 1923, the first Waldorf School in the Netherlands was founded in The Hague. A century later, Waldorf Schools are flourishing in the Netherlands. Especially in the last decade, more and more schools have been founded. Currently, there are over 18,500 students at 97 Waldorf primary schools and over 12,900 students at 27 Waldorf secondary schools (separate from

Waldorf primary schools) in all parts of the Netherlands (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2022a). In comparison, there are 6,581 primary schools in total in the Netherlands (approximately 1.5 million students) and 641 secondary schools (approximately 1 million students) (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023). Figure 4.1 (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2022a) shows the growth of the number of Waldorf schools.

Concerning Waldorf teacher education in the Netherlands, the following is the case at the moment. Although a Bachelor of Education for primary education makes a teacher qualified to teach at every (Waldorf) primary school in the Netherlands, there is a full-time as well as a part-time Bachelor's Teacher Education program for student teachers who want to become a Waldorf primary school teacher at the public *University of Applied Sciences Leiden*. This university also offers programs in Waldorf education as well as eurythmy, music and art therapy (Willmann & Weiss, 2019). This bachelor's is accredited and acknowledged by the state. With the specific bachelor's degree for Waldorf teaching in primary school, teachers are qualified to teach at all primary schools in the Netherlands, both Waldorf schools and any other kind of primary school. Currently, a Master's programme in Education is being developed at the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden*, focussing on Waldorf pedagogy, art and nature. In addition, the HAN¹

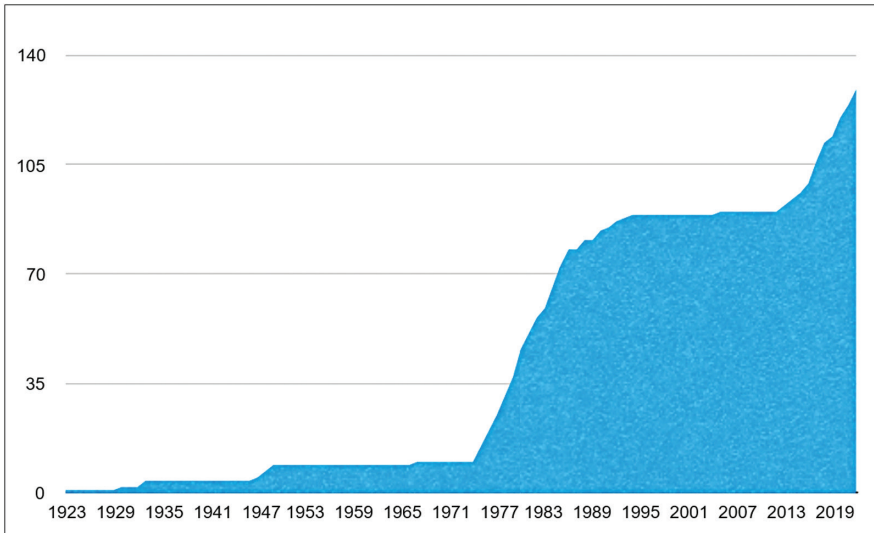


Figure 4.1 The increase of Waldorf schools in the Netherlands from 1923 to 2023.

¹ HAN is an acronym for *Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen* [University of Applied Sciences in Arnhem en Nijmegen, two cities in the Netherlands].

University of Applied Sciences offers a Minor programme on Waldorf Education for primary school student teachers who are interested in Waldorf education. Primary teachers, secondary teachers and school leaders and administrators with a regular teaching degree can take specific courses to learn about the Waldorf pedagogy (Willmann & Weiss, 2019).

Research Question and Methodology

This chapter focuses on the perception of Waldorf education in the Netherlands. The research question is: How has Waldorf Education in the Netherlands developed since the foundation of the first Dutch Waldorf school in 1923? The aim of this chapter is to identify and describe the discourse about Waldorf education in the Netherlands. Special attention is paid to the research group on Waldorf education at the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden* (The Netherlands).

To answer the research question, the authors tried to gather as much information/data about the perception of Waldorf education in the Netherlands as possible. Collecting data by studying existing research literature on Dutch Waldorf education resulted in a few insights: Literature on Dutch Waldorf education is scarce, written in the Dutch language and, in some cases, is outdated and only available in hard copy. In our search for the existing literature, we contacted representatives from primary schools, schools, teacher education, teachers and school administrators. We engaged in dialogue about the themes in this chapter (see the grey box) and also asked for additional literature using the snowball method. Wherever possible, we tried to use literature references in this chapter.

Guiding Questions for the Conversations/Dialogues With Stakeholders

- How is Waldorf education perceived and discussed a) in the public and b) in academia? Is it a concept that is accepted/respected/canonised? Is it part of (public) teacher education or vocational education?
- What are the differences and similarities between “public” and “academic” discourses? Are there influences between the two?
- What is the self-image of Waldorf educators with regard to academia? Is there a tendency toward segregation or integration?
- What is the relationship between the public discussion and the success/spread of Waldorf education?
- What platforms and forums (blogs, journals, publishers) are there for discussions? Are certain media or actors/authors particularly active or visible?

- To what extent is Waldorf education associated a) with anthroposophy and b) with Rudolf Steiner? Are attempts of detachment to be noticed (instead: replacement of topoi from developmental psychology, philosophy, theology)?
- Is Waldorf education primarily perceived as a method, worldview or something else (an alternative choice to the mainstream)? Are there differences between self-perception and perception by others?
- Are certain practices (educational, scholastic, instructional) perceived as representative of Waldorf education? Do these stand out from the image of “typical reform education”?
- Is Waldorf education primarily associated with school, elementary education or communal living (Camphill Nederland, n.d.)?
- Regarding the temporal dimension: Has the image or perception changed in the last years/decades? Have institutions, organisations and practices changed?
- Are there interrelations between Waldorf education and the other anthroposophical fields of practice, medicine and agriculture?

(These questions were derived from the guiding questions for this book publication.)

Existing Research on Waldorf Education in the Netherlands

One of the often referred-to publications is the doctoral dissertation of Hilligje Steenbergen (2009). The Steenbergen thesis comprised a school effectiveness study which compared Waldorf and non-Waldorf schools in the Netherlands. It is, at this moment, the only effectiveness study on Waldorf schools in the Netherlands. Data included cohort data from the year 1999. Variables included both cognitive output (test scores on language, mathematics and general problem-solving skills) and non-cognitive output (student-related: personality factors, self-respect, attitudes towards learning, motivation, learning strategies) (Steenbergen, 2009). The results of the study showed that:

Students in Waldorf schools have nearly the same scores on verbal intelligence and slightly lower scores on symbolic intelligence than students in mainstream education. Looking at personality factors, it can be concluded that students in Waldorf schools, compared to students in mainstream schools, have higher scores on mildness and openness.

(Steenbergen, 2009, p. 155)

Other, more recent research publications have been followed by publications of the Dutch research group on Waldorf education at the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden*. These descriptive, both theoretical and practice-oriented (mostly) Dutch publications focus on a variety of topics in the context

of Waldorf education: Assessment, diversity, giftedness, student engagement, deep listening, teacher artistry, pedagogy, subjectification, teacher education, the value of Waldorf education (for alumni students of Waldorf schools) and identity of Waldorf education (University of Applied Sciences Leiden, 2023). A podcast series of this research group on inclusion and diversity in Dutch Waldorf schools is listened to by over 30,000 listeners (Spotify, 2023). Next to these, there are research publications describing the research group and a brief history of Waldorf education in the Netherlands (Mayo, 2018).

Perception of Waldorf Education in the Netherlands

Waldorf education in the Netherlands is perceived in various ways. A first distinction can be made between perceptions of Waldorf education from “outside” Waldorf schools and perceptions of those within the Waldorf school community.

The Name of Waldorf Schools

One of the reasons for this is confusion about the name that is used in the Netherlands to refer to Waldorf schools. In the Netherlands, Waldorf schools are called in Dutch *Vrije Scholen* [Free Schools]. This name was originally suggested by Rudolf Steiner himself to underline that in the Netherlands, Waldorf schools are free from governmental influence or state regulations. However, nowadays, the name *Vrije Scholen* is, by some, incorrectly associated with a school without proper rules for students where “students are free to do whatever they want” (van Baars & Harmsen, 2022). This has resulted in a reconsideration of the name. A few Waldorf schools in the Netherlands are now referred to as “Waldorf School” instead of *Vrije School* (van Baars & Harmsen, 2022). In a similar vein, the *Dutch Association of Waldorf Schools* has made “protecting the brand” of *Vrije Scholen* (Waldorf Schools) one of its focus points for 2021–2026. Some who use the “incorrect” use of the word *Vrije Scholen*, for instance, by schools that are not Waldorf schools at all but want to state that they are “free” to do what they want, are not protected in Dutch law. The perceived danger of this development is – according to the *Dutch Association of Waldorf Schools* – that the brand of Dutch Waldorf schools will lose meaning.

Student Background

Another perception of Waldorf schools in the Netherlands is that students in Dutch Waldorf schools have a specific background that can be characterised as Caucasian, highly educated, well-to-do parents, with a progressive or left-wing political orientation (van Baars & Harmsen, 2022). In addition, parents of students at Dutch Waldorf schools are perceived to find health (as in organic food, yoga, meditation) and nature important. Dutch Waldorf schools are sometimes seen as closed communities that are focused on their own “bubble” or closed community in society. Also, traditionally, parents

of students at Dutch Waldorf schools are critical towards the Dutch national immunisation programme (van Baars & Harmsen, 2022). The specific reason for this critical attitude of Waldorf parents in the Netherlands was studied to a limited extent in the past. For instance, Harmsen and colleagues conducted a qualitative study on factors that influence vaccination decision-making by parents who visit anthroposophical child welfare centres. Although it is unknown whether these parents also had children in Waldorf schools, it is interesting to see that the study showed that multiple reasons could influence the decision for vaccination, varying from specific anthroposophy-related reasons (anthroposophical health care) to non-Waldorf related reasons (Harmsen et al., 2012). They found that factors influencing Dutch parents are lifestyle (e.g., babysitter rather than daycare, attitudes towards breastfeeding), perception of health, beliefs about childhood diseases (overcoming diseases can make a child stronger), perceptions about the risks of diseases, perceptions about vaccine effectiveness and vaccine components and trust in institutions. This finding is supported by other studies on parents with an anthroposophical worldview (Woonink, 2010). “It is not only anthroposophical considerations that play a role in the parents’ decisions on vaccination; homoeopathic and alternative medicine are influential as well” (Klomp et al., 2015, p. 504). Compared to other persons who might have a critical stance towards vaccination in the Netherlands (for instance, orthodox-protestants), anthroposophical parents are more concerned about the possible risks and side effects of vaccines and about the risks and benefits of childhood diseases.

Alleged Racism in the 1990s

Around the year 1995, a Dutch newspaper published an article about possible racist elements in the curriculum of a few Dutch Waldorf schools. The most prominent example of this is the perception that originated in the 1990s that Dutch Waldorf schools were teaching primary school students about different “races” in which supposedly some “races” were superior to others (Antroposofische Vereniging in Nederland, 2000; Jeurissen, 1997; N.N., 1998; Zwaap, 2000). This resulted in a Dutch committee that studied whether the alleged racist practices were created by a few individual teachers or whether they were connected to statements by Rudolf Steiner (Antroposofische Vereniging in Nederland, 2000). The committee found 12 statements by Steiner that were considered racist or at least questionable in this respect. In a way, these statements by Steiner are contradictory to other statements by Steiner, where he emphasised that all individuals are equal. The committee also mentioned that it is possible scholars who translated Steiner also wrote their own interpretation into the translation, creating some discriminating and racist paragraphs (Antroposofische Vereniging in Nederland, 2000). After the committee presented its results, the *Dutch Association of Waldorf Schools* developed a non-discrimination code of conduct (Zwaap, 2000) and, more recently, also a “diversity code” (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2021a; 2021b). Despite the

commotion in society and within Waldorf schools about the statements by Steiner, the number of students attending Waldorf schools remained stable.²

Dogmatic or Progressive?

Perceptions regarding Dutch Waldorf schools also differ among people within the Dutch Waldorf schools (Hogervorst, 2008). There is a difference between students, parents and teachers who have what could be called a dogmatic-conservative approach and a more progressive-modern approach towards Waldorf schools. Some students, parents and teachers try to follow Steiners' guidelines for Waldorf schools in detail. The latter combines the overall ideas of Steiner together with insights from present-day society (Hogervorst, 2008; De Kam, 2022). An example of these perceived differences within the Dutch Waldorf school community are, for instance, the importance of caring for children and instructional skills, the use of a fixed curriculum or teaching method and the importance of diversity and inclusion. These differences come to the fore when people respond to podcasts regarding the future of Dutch Waldorf schools, essays in Dutch Waldorf journals (Hogervorst, 2008) and professional development courses, for instance, regarding the age of children to start reading or the use of technology in school.

Dutch Waldorf Educators' Perception of Academia

There is no previous research on how Dutch Waldorf teacher educators or Dutch Waldorf educators at primary or secondary schools perceive academia or the perception of Waldorf education in academia. It is common for people who want to teach at primary schools to attend the Waldorf teacher education for primary schools at the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden* (Leiden, the Netherlands) or attend a non-Waldorf teacher education program.

Since 2013, the *Waldorf Teacher Education Institute for Primary Schools* has been a part of this university with all kinds of (non-Waldorf related) studies. Before 2013, the Waldorf Teacher Education Institute was an independent small university that focused solely on teacher education for Waldorf schools. Doing some research, reading academic literature and critically reflecting on literature are a part of the Waldorf teacher education for primary schools. The same can be said for teacher education institutes for secondary schools, with the exception that there is no specific Waldorf teacher education institute for secondary schools with a bachelor's or master's programme. The Dutch *Begeleidingsdienst van Vrijescholen* [Educational Waldorf Consultancy] and the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden* offer various research-based professional development courses on various (Waldorf and general educational) topics for teachers, administrators, school management and special educational needs.

2 Regarding the German reception of this scandal on anthroposophy and racism see Martins in this book [note from the editors].

Although teachers in the Netherlands experience a high workload with very limited time to read literature, certain researchers, for instance, Gert Biesta (2022) and Aziza Mayo (2015, 2018), are followed and respected and their work is read. In addition, publications and podcast series from our (the authors of this chapter) research group *Values of Waldorf Education* (part of the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden*) are found to be of teachers' interest. At the same time, there are also teachers who – within their limited time to read – prefer to study the original works of Rudolf Steiner or teachers who do not experience time to spend on reading or other professionalisation activities at all.

Dutch Waldorf Platforms

Part of, and a stimulus for, the development of the Dutch Waldorf education movement are several online and offline journals, publishers and communities. These platforms function as meeting places and communication channels for all (though mostly parents and teachers) who are interested in Dutch Waldorf Education. These platforms stimulated the development or growth of Dutch Waldorf education, and some functioned as a way to “educate” or introduce parents to Waldorf education practices and the anthroposophical background. In Table 4.1, an overview of the most important Dutch Waldorf platforms is presented.

Table 4.1 Dutch Waldorf platforms.

<i>Name of Platform/Journal/ Publisher</i>	<i>Short Description</i>
<i>Vereniging van Vrijescholen</i> [Dutch Association of Waldorf Schools]	This national Waldorf association represents Dutch Waldorf schools in national and European politics (through ECSWE ³). Next to that, the association supports Dutch Waldorf schools by providing guidelines on themes such as “Waldorf teacher shortage”, “diversity and inclusion” and “educational quality”. In addition, the association also offers an online platform/wiki for teachers to share lesson plans and ideas.
<i>Begeleidingsdienst Vrije Scholen</i> [Educational Waldorf Consultancy]	This national Waldorf organisation offers consultancy, professional development activities and supervision for Dutch Waldorf schools.
<i>Lectoraat Waarden van vrijeschoolonderwijs</i> [Research Group <i>Value and Values</i> of Waldorf Education at <i>University of Applied Sciences</i> <i>Leiden</i>]	This research group at the <i>University of Applied Sciences</i> (Mayo, 2018) consists of teacher-researchers who are working on or have completed their research projects and PhD projects and one chair/program director.

(Continued)

3 European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE).

Table 4.1 (Continued)

<i>Name of Platform/Journal/ Publisher</i>	<i>Short Description</i>
<p>Podcast series:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Values and Values of Dutch Waldorf Education * Diversity and Inclusion in Dutch Waldorf Education 	<p>In the last few years, two researchers – Jan Jaap Hubeek and Wouter Modderkolk – from the research group <i>Value and Values of Waldorf Education</i> made two podcast series based on the research they conducted in the research group. The podcasts are available on Spotify (in Dutch).</p>
<p>Publishers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Christofoor * Paidos * Vrij Geestesleven * Nearchus * Antrovista 	<p>There are several Dutch book and journal publishers who primarily publish books related to Waldorf education. A few examples are provided.</p>
<p>Journals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Seizoener * Vrije Opvoedkunst * Motief 	<p>There are multiple Dutch journals on Waldorf education (and anthroposophy). A few examples are provided.</p>
<p>Platforms, networks and professional learning communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Dutch pedagogical section of the <i>Dutch Anthroposophical Society</i> * School management of secondary education (in Dutch: Platform VO) * School management of primary education (in Dutch: Platform PO) * Language platform/network * Network on gifted students * Rainbow network on social skills and group dynamics of students * Professional learning community on assessment * Professional learning community on inclusion and diversity 	<p>Several online and offline platforms, networks and professional communities exist for multiple stakeholders (teachers, school management, etc.) on various topics. A few examples are provided.</p>
<p>Websites/Facebook/Instagram</p>	<p>There are several Dutch websites and Facebook/Instagram pages regarding Waldorf education in the Netherlands. For instance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * everydaymommyday.com * Vrijeschool (Facebook group) * Vrijeschoolleerkrachten (Facebook group) * Islamic.waldorf (Instagram) * Waldorfaandewerf (Instagram) * Vrijehogeschool (Instagram) * Antroposofieinspireert (Instagram) * Seizoener (Instagram)

Typical Dutch Waldorf Education Practices

What was mentioned earlier about differences between Waldorf schools and between students and parents in the Netherlands can also be said about typical Dutch Waldorf education practices. The *Dutch Association of Waldorf Schools*, together with a group of people from schools and academia, has created a “compass” for Dutch Waldorf education (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2023). Based on the Waldorf pedagogics core principles (Leibner, 2017; Wember, 2018), the Dutch compass comprises eight elements and provides insights that Waldorf teachers could use in their teaching. The eight elements are the image of the human being, phases of child development, curriculum, pedagogical skills and teaching methods, teachers’ autonomy, relatedness and relationships, spiritual orientation and human contact.

In addition, there are ten “unique elements” of Waldorf schools (in the Netherlands) formulated by the *Dutch Association of Waldorf Schools* (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2022b). Though not unique for the Netherlands or for all Dutch schools (whether Waldorf schools or not), these elements are seen by the *Dutch Waldorf Association* as unique for Waldorf schools in the Netherlands compared to other schools in the Netherlands. These ten elements can be found in Table 4.2.

During the last decades, two publications state that elements from Waldorf schools have become more and more accepted in all other kinds of schools in the Netherlands (van Baars & Harmsen, 2022, December 5; Mayo, 2018). As Mayo puts it: “Didactical practices, such as the integrated use of rhythmic movement during math lessons that used to be regarded as outlandish and ‘typical Waldorf’, have now become regular features in many mainstream Dutch schools” (Mayo, 2018, p. 272).

Similar differences within the Dutch Waldorf school movement (schools, parents, students) exist nowadays among the discussion about whether Waldorf education is a kind of school with a specific method (for instance, Dalton or Montessori) or a school in which a certain world view (anthroposophy). In

Table 4.2 Proposed unique elements of Waldorf schools in the Netherlands (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2022b).

Proposed Unique Elements of Waldorf Schools (as Opposed to Other Dutch Schools)

1. Waldorf schools prepare students for future society.
 2. Waldorf schools seek challenges in everyday reality.
 3. Waldorf schools offer age-specific education and education is fit for the developmental phase of students.
 4. Waldorf schools follow the rhythm of nature and the seasons.
 5. Eurythmy is a subject which supports all other subjects.
 6. Waldorf schools perceive all learning as a creative process.
 7. Teaching main lessons provides the opportunity for deepening curriculum.
 8. Teachers are aware of themselves as an example.
 9. Waldorf schools develop the innate receptiveness of a child.
 10. Waldorf schools create a safe and trustworthy learning environment.
-

the Netherlands, people generally make a distinction between public schools (state-funded), which accept all students and are neutral in their worldview, and non-public schools (also state-funded). The non-public schools can be method schools (Dalton, Montessori, Freinet, Jenaplan) or worldview schools (for instance, Protestant, Roman Catholic, general Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu). It is unclear whether this discussion and this distinction between method or worldview is important for the general public.

The Perceived Relation Between Dutch Waldorf Education, Anthroposophy, Anthroposophical Agriculture and Anthroposophical Medicine

Rooted in anthroposophy, Waldorf schools in the Netherlands “use” anthroposophy in different degrees. Some schools would study and read the works of Rudolf Steiner together weekly and have a portrait of Rudolf Steiner on the walls of the school. In other schools, anthroposophy and the works of Steiner are more perceived as the origin of Waldorf schools, which are not studied actively but “used” as a source of inspiration and origin. In the campaign for new teachers, the *Dutch Waldorf Association* presents Waldorf schools as a school with a warm atmosphere, where you can be yourself and there is room for creativity and “Waldorf pedagogy”. There is no reference to anthroposophy or Steiner. This emphasis on creativity and a warm atmosphere is different from the current debate and policy in the Netherlands to focus on “the basis”, which is interpreted as a focus on mathematics and the Dutch language (reading and writing) (Onderwijsraad; 2022). Parents who chose to send their children to Waldorf schools in the Netherlands stated that they are not so much connected with anthroposophy (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2015). Similar to most movements, there are more conservative and “hardcore” schools and more progressive and innovative Waldorf schools in the Netherlands. Research is needed to gain insight into the (perceived) relation of Dutch Waldorf schools with anthroposophy. A few cases are known where teachers at a Waldorf school desire a different relation or closer connection between Waldorf education and anthroposophy. In these few cases, sometimes teachers leave a Waldorf school to start their own non-funded Waldorf school.

The *Dutch Anthroposophical Society* (a part of the Dornach-based *General Anthroposophical Society*) is the overarching association in which multidisciplinary activities regarding anthroposophical healthcare, agriculture and education can be found. For instance, there is a study group on medical-educational topics. At the *University of Applied Sciences Leiden*, there are two research groups related to anthroposophy; one concerns anthroposophical health care and one Waldorf education. The aims of the research group on anthroposophical health care are to optimise, monitor, validate and contribute to the professionalisation of health care professionals in the domain of anthroposophical health care (University of Applied Sciences Leiden, 2023). The aims of the research group on Waldorf education are:

- Build knowledge and understanding of purposes and practices in contemporary Waldorf education.

- Explore and evaluate innovative practices in Waldorf education.
- Contribute to the professional development of present and future educators in Waldorf schools.

(Mayo, 2018, p. 269)

Both research groups are funded by the *University of Applied Sciences* itself and receive additional funding from the Dutch Waldorf movement and anthroposophical health care movement in The Netherlands. In addition, both research groups acquire funding through grant applications.

For some schools and parents who perceive anthroposophy as their worldview or lifestyle, the combination of attending Waldorf school, having an anthroposophical general practitioner and eating bio-organic food is self-evident. An example of this can be found in the Camphill communities in the Netherlands (Camphill Nederland, n.d.). On the other hand, there are also many parents who send their children to Waldorf schools just for the school itself and who do not affiliate with anthroposophy, health care or agriculture, as was shown by a survey of the *Dutch Waldorf Association* (van Baars & Harmen, 2022, December 5; Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2015). There is, however, research that shows that parents and students who choose Dutch Waldorf schools do so because of the *Bildung* aspect and the importance of arts and creativity and personal development of students (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2015). This might be related to the societal tendency to focus on mathematics and the Dutch language, which might lead to parents choosing a school with the mindset of whole child development.

Changes Over Time in Dutch Waldorf Education (Institutions, Organisations and Practices)

Due to societal changes at the end of the 20th century (globalisation, technological developments), the quality of education according to “society” was “defined by the extent to which it contributed to the economic progress of society”, with an emphasis on economic participation and the importance of qualification for specific jobs (Mayo, 2018, p. 270). These developments gave rise to governmental policies and preferences regarding assessment results.

As part of a larger reform in Waldorf education in 2000 in the Netherlands, a transition took place in the Dutch Waldorf education school system. The Waldorf schools adapted towards the governmental organisational system in which primary schools consist of eight years (students age 4–12), where there was an additional year formerly. Also, the schools embraced the system of exams and (standardised) assessment and national examination, both in primary and secondary Waldorf education. Where formerly all students stayed in school till 12th grade and received a vocational certification as the only option, now also certificates for pre-university education are an option for students, and depending on their desired level of certification, students stay in school till the 10th, 11th or 12th grade (Mayo, 2018; Steenbergen, 2009).

Within Waldorf schools, this development is evaluated differently. Some educators feel that the core Waldorf principles are difficult to maintain in the new system, while others value the innovation in Waldorf schools to prepare students for societal challenges. Nowadays, Waldorf education has gained popularity, is growing in number (Vereniging van Vrijescholen, 2022a) and is accepted in Dutch society (Mayo, 2018). With solid national rankings, Waldorf education has, in the last decades, been seen by parents as a good school with room for creativity and broad personal identity development of children (Mayo, 2018).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter focused on the perception of Waldorf education in the Netherlands. The research question was: How has Waldorf education in the Netherlands developed since the foundation of the first Dutch Waldorf school in 1923? The development can be characterised in a few ways: In terms of absolute student growth, Waldorf education started small in 1923 and has been increasing in number (of schools and students) ever since. Waldorf education has gained popularity over the years and is accepted in Dutch society. Especially in the last decade, the number of Waldorf schools and students increased. In terms of worldview or the role of anthroposophy, Waldorf education has developed in the last century towards multiple perspectives and interpretations of the core principles or concepts of Waldorf education. The role and interpretation of anthroposophy varies within and among Waldorf schools. Research about Waldorf education in the Netherlands is scarce, and more research would provide insight into how Waldorf education is perceived in the Netherlands, how students perceive the added value of Waldorf education and which role the tradition of 100-year-old Waldorf education in the Netherlands can play in the future.

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5 Three Discourses of Waldorf Education in Norway

Anne-Mette Stabel and Frode Barkved

Recognised, Overlooked, and Criticised

Although Norway has more Waldorf schools in relation to its population than any other country in the world (Rebner, 2008, p. 32), and Waldorf education is recognised in law, it is not really considered a relevant research topic in academic circles (Stabel, 2016). The media sometimes portray Waldorf education as interesting but also as unscientific and suspect, something to distance oneself from. This is particularly true of the ideas that formed the historical basis for Waldorf education, namely anthroposophy. Opinions also differ within the Waldorf education community. In the following, we will take a closer look at current discourses within and about Waldorf education in Norway and discuss some of the tensions that exist. For reasons of space, we will limit our investigation to Waldorf school education and exclude early childhood education, what is known as curative education, and anthroposophical social therapy activities, except for where they are directly related to Waldorf teacher training.

We have primarily focused on examining material dating from 2008 to 2022. In 2008, the anthroposophical movement marked the centenary of Rudolf Steiner's first visit to Norway. There was much media attention, supportive as well as rather harshly critical. RSUC was a central target of the criticism, and it had long-lasting effects, for example, a strengthening of the academic side of the programme, new curricula, and changes to the syllabus.

The text consists of four main parts. We begin with a brief outline of the development of Waldorf education in Norway and its status. In this section, we also raise some methodological issues relating to our text. We explain the time span of the investigation, sampling, delimitation of source material, and how we have interpreted the material. This is followed by three chapters in which we examine the position of Waldorf education in academia, the media, and internally within the Norwegian Waldorf education community. We discuss what the findings tell us about the reputation and position of Waldorf education in Norway today and conclude with some reflections on our findings.

Waldorf Education in Norway

There are currently 34 Steiner/Waldorf schools in Norway, with a total of just over 5,000 pupils and around 800 teachers (Steinerskoleforbundet, n.d.). In primary schools in Norway, there are altogether 635,000 pupils, so the Steiner Waldorf alternative is numerically not that big. The only institution in Norway that trains Waldorf teachers, RSUC, offers both full-time and part-time programmes. Students can take a three-year bachelor's degree programme in Waldorf education. There are separate programmes for school and kindergarten teachers. In addition, RSUC offers teacher training for primary and lower secondary school years 1–7 as a five-year integrated master's degree in collaboration with *Oslo Metropolitan University*. There are also part-time, four-year bachelor's degree programmes in both social pedagogy and early childhood education. RSUC also provides a module-based, part-time master's degree programme in the subjects of Educational Research and Nature, Ecology, and Sustainability. In addition to the degree-based programmes, RSUC offers credit-conferring continuing education courses that focus on specific subject areas (RSUC, n.d.).

Methodological Reflections

The researchers' links to the topic under study and the selection and interpretation of sources all have a bearing on the credibility of the findings presented. Transparency about these matters is, therefore, a crucial part of the research process, and we have chosen to give our readers insight into our choices.

Both authors of this article have long been part of Norway's anthropological and Waldorf education community, and we thus have close professional and personal ties to the book's topic. Since we have both contributed to research in the academic field and taken part in media debates, our names will naturally come up as text references. Although we have tried to address our preconceptions, a researcher's positionality, points of view, and worldview may, of course, influence their research (Holmes, 2020). Through conscious and critical reflection, caution, and open communication, we have endeavoured to uncover and address both the aspects we have been able to identify as closeness and loyalty-related challenges and the challenges that are more difficult to identify, often referred to as the "spectacles behind the eyes" (Gilje & Grimen, 2005, p. 148). During this process, we have discussed whether our involvement in Waldorf education could have influenced our choices of sources, methods, and interpretations and whether we have overlooked important sources that could portray Waldorf education in an unfavourable light. For this reason, we have reviewed our choice of material and our interpretations several times in order to ensure transparency and an impartial presentation. At the same time, we are aware that our relationship with the topic gives us unique access to the material and that our closeness to

the subject matter will enable us to identify nuances and tensions in the field that we otherwise would not necessarily have been able to see.

In the process of mapping the Norwegian discourse on Waldorf education, we have chosen to examine three different categories of source material:

1. Academic publications: doctoral theses, master's degree theses, peer-reviewed articles, and specialist literature.
2. Media material: articles, stories, reviews, brief news items, and debates.
3. Texts from publications from the Waldorf education community in Norway.

We have used different methods when searching for sources, including open search engines and physical searches in libraries and other collections. We have also used the internal web-based weekly newsletter *Nyhetsdryss* [Weekly glimpses] (Dialogos, medie- og ressurscenter, nyhetsbrev, n.d.). It provides an overview of large and small publications and events within the Waldorf education and anthroposophy-inspired community in Norway and some international items. This combination of search methods has given us a good overview of the field. We have searched RSUC's register of master's theses to gain an overview. Theses from RSUC are not available through the digital library services that are intended to highlight research literature produced at universities and university colleges. The RSUC website contains a list of articles published by its employees, peer-reviewed articles, and other texts.

We have made use of both skimming and a more thorough, in-depth reading of selected texts. Skimming allows us to learn about the scope of the material and existing discourses, their topics, and trends. More detailed, in-depth reading allows us to identify nuances, tensions, and how the material has developed. We have also used quantitative methods, for example, to determine the scope of master's theses, PhD theses, and publications written by RSUC staff. Norwegian texts that are cited, and names of publications, are translated to English by the two authors of this article.

The Academic Discourse and Waldorf Education

Waldorf teacher training in Norway has no long-standing academic tradition. The training established in 1975 began as a seminar-based course of education. The bachelor's degree at RSUC was launched in 2004, followed by an international, experience-based master's degree offered as a part-time programme from 2005. The objective of the master's degree programme was to strengthen the academic aspect of Waldorf education, develop a culture for Waldorf education research, raise the field's critical level, and, in a long-term perspective, contribute to qualifying more people for admission to a doctoral degree programme. The establishment of the master's degree programme was one of several measures aimed at promoting a culture for research in and on the Waldorf school's practices, thus bringing it into a research context. It

was also a goal to justify Waldorf education in an academic and professional manner, thereby making it possible to rebut the criticism levelled against it (Hugo & Kvalvaag, 2006, p. 2). This entails challenges and changes in the legitimation of Waldorf pedagogy. It has been necessary to raise awareness of the distinctive nature of Waldorf pedagogy in research and in debates in Norway and also in a broader context. A research department was established at RSUC in cooperation with *Snellman University College* in Finland and the *Waldorf University College* in Sweden, both corresponding institutions to RSUC. The *Nordic Research Network on Steiner Education* (NORENSE) was established in 2008 (NORENSE, n.d.). The web-based peer-reviewed journal *Research on Steiner Education* (RoSE) – co-hosted by *Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences* in Germany and RSUC – was launched at the same time. The first issue was published in 2010. A total of 13 issues have been published since then.

Doctoral Degrees

During the period from 2008 to 2022, three PhD theses focusing on Waldorf education were written in Norway, plus one thesis that touched on the topic. That is not much, considering RSUC's targeted efforts to strengthen the academic side of Waldorf education.

Three of the previously mentioned theses were written by people who were educated or had worked for a long time in Waldorf education enterprises. Two of the theses were works on the history of education (Edlund, 2008; Stabel, 2014). The third thesis was a comparative study of a state teacher training programme and the Waldorf teacher training programme (Granlund, 2013). In the fourth thesis, modern dance is the topic, including eurythmy (Schjønby, 2012). These four theses appear to be “the odd one out” in their respective academic communities. The fact that three of the four people who completed their doctoral degrees during this period had worked in an anthroposophical or Waldorf education environment serves to reinforce the impression that the topic is not perceived as an important field of research in the Norwegian academic discourse. One possible explanation for the fact that Waldorf education is rarely a topic in research on education is that there is fierce competition for research funds, and it is easier to succeed in this competition with research projects that focus on the state schools attended by the majority of Norwegian pupils. The main responsibility for research on topics relating to Waldorf education, therefore, falls to RSUC.

Master's Theses

A considerable number of master's theses with Waldorf education as a main or subsidiary topic were written during the 2008–2022 period. We have registered a total of 121 master's theses, 97 of which were made at RSUC. Most of the master theses from universities outside the Waldorf context take

a didactic perspective focusing on examining Waldorf education practices, eventually comparing Waldorf education methods with methods used in other types of schools. Four deal with special needs education perspectives. The underlying ideas are mainly briefly mentioned. One is a more detailed study of the ideology debate on Waldorf education that took place in Norway in 2010 following the publication of two books about the Waldorf schools in Norway (Koren, 2012).

The vast majority of the master theses in this period are made at RSUC. They focus on topics that are explicitly linked to Waldorf education and practical educational issues that the students are familiar with from their own field of practice. The ideas underlying anthroposophy are dealt with thoroughly in some theses, briefly in others, and in some hardly at all. Overall, the master's theses from RSUC contain more about Steiner's philosophy than theses from other universities and university colleges, which is hardly surprising. In several of the theses, it was commented that Steiner's works may be challenging to deal with, particularly for people without an academic background in philosophy or the history of ideas. Since anthroposophy is the philosophical background for Waldorf education practice, describing it is nevertheless a key part of several theses. Developing "a synthesis of personal, professional and academic training" was a key objective when the master's degree programme was established. It was also an express ambition to develop a "Waldorf education research culture" that was closely linked to "both the idea (Steiner's educational impulse) and reality (what happens in the Waldorf schools)" (Hugo, 2005, p. 3). The ambition to disseminate results from the master's theses and thus introduce knowledge about Waldorf education issues to a wider scholarly audience has not been extensive.

Scholarly Articles

The production of peer-reviewed articles on Waldorf education by Norwegian researchers or authors over the past 10 or 12 years has been limited. It is primarily people with links to the Waldorf education community who have written a number of peer-reviewed articles, the most important arena for which is the journal *RoSE*. Virtually all of these articles have close ties with Waldorf education topics, and the authors make use of Steiner as part of a wider range of theoretical material. The articles address challenges and opportunities in Steiner's texts within a contemporary theory of science context. Methodical-didactic topics have also been considered in a theoretical manner, and critical perspectives have been highlighted.

One prominent contribution to the academic discourse on Waldorf education was the *Nordic Journal for Pedagogy and Criticism*, which had a peer-reviewed special issue on Waldorf education. Henrik Holm and Anne-Mette Stabel, both members of the RSUC staff, were guest editors (Holm & Stabel, 2019). It was the first time that Waldorf education was the topic of a peer-reviewed journal in Norway. Six peer-reviewed articles were produced. Most of the authors were

connected in varying degrees with the Waldorf education community. This shows that the topic primarily attracts the interest of researchers who already have a relationship with it. The special issue did not give rise to debate. The other academic arenas where Waldorf education has been thematised over the past 10 or 12 years have not generated any debate either.

A more detailed review of publications by RSUC employees in the past 10–15 years shows that the publications can be divided into three categories: explicit Waldorf education topics, general educational or education policy topics, and publications on topics from completely different fields. There are the fewest publications in the first category, which may come as a surprise considering that RSUC is the only academic community in Norway that has an explicit responsibility for research and dissemination in the field. This begs the question, why are there relatively few publications originating from this institution linked to Waldorf education? One reason is that it takes time to build a new scholarly community, it costs money, and a university college responsible for several programmes of professional study in the field also has to prioritise its teaching activities. That leaves little time for research. In order to meet the qualification requirements that apply to university and university college staff, RSUC has appointed researchers with professor/associate professor qualifications in other fields. This helps the university college meet the qualification requirements but also makes the field itself less distinct. RSUC experiences tension between the preservation of uniqueness, critical reflection, and innovation. One way of meeting these challenges is to establish practice-oriented research projects. One example is the ongoing research project about the Waldorf practice for five and six-year-olds. The intention is to write four or five peer-reviewed articles about the findings (Stabel & Stray, 2023).

Specialist Literature on Waldorf Education and Its Foundations in the History of Ideas

We have demonstrated that Waldorf education has not been an important topic in academic discourse. Few books on the topic have been published in the past 10–15 years, all of them based on academic works. The book on the history of the Waldorf school in Norway (Stabel, 2016) received a surprisingly high number of reviews in the daily press and in specialist journals, but no debate ensued (Lengali, 2018). Hanne Weisser's book on art and teaching in the Waldorf Schools from 2020 was a republication of a book from 1996 with a new chapter. In the preface, the well-known educator and author Inge Eidsvåg expresses surprise at “how little curiosity there seems to be in the state school system about what the Waldorf schools stand for, both as regards how they view their pupils and their approach to education”. Eidsvåg believes that the different types of schools can learn a lot from each other, not “in order to become alike, but to mutually enrich their own teaching practices – and perhaps also

question aspects of them” (Eidsvåg, in Weisser, 2020, p. 11). In Eidsvåg’s opinion, it is important for everyone who works in education to be interested in different ways of working. He does not go into the reasons why there is so little exchange between the groups.

Books on Steiner and his ideas have also been published in the past 10–15 years. The philosopher and current head of research at RSUC, Terje Sparby, wrote a book where he gave a critical examination of the concept of Steiner’s spiritual science (Sparby, 2008). Five years later, he edited and co-authored an anthology on Steiner as a philosopher in which Steiner’s early philosophy and his epistemological works are discussed in light of his subsequent esoteric-anthroposophical phase (Sparby, 2013). In 2015, Kaj Skagen published a book on the life and work of the young Rudolf Steiner (Skagen, 2015a). The book describes the years before Steiner established the *Anthroposophical Society* and the Waldorf approach to education. Several important writers reviewed the book, and one of them called it a “a thousand-page escape into mysticism” (Søbye, 2015). Others praised Skagen for his efforts to view Steiner in a wider cultural history context but also argued that the book was too long (Berg Eriksen, 2015). The debate that followed soon became extremely heated, and an unusually high number of contributions were published. Skagen responded to some of his most ardent critics in an article in which he wrote that anthroposophy must be one of “the few areas in which academics pride themselves on their ignorance” (Skagen, 2015b). We have not thoroughly investigated the truth of Skagen’s characteristic of the academic discourse. However, we have observed that academics are more often in debates about anthroposophy than in research on this subject.

Waldorf Education in the Public Discourse

Although Steiner’s ideas attracted the interest of his contemporaries, the debate about anthroposophy was often heated (Lachman, 2009; Skagen, 2015a; Ullrich, 2008). That was also the case in Norway. Ever since Steiner gave lectures in Norway in the years 1908–1923 and the first school was established in 1926, people have questioned Steiner’s views on science, his understanding of human beings as beings of body, soul, and spirit, and, not least, on how anthroposophy was the inspiration for the first Waldorf School and still is part of the basis for legitimising Waldorf education, though not always clearly worded (Stabel, 2016). Perhaps this is part of the reason for ridiculing Waldorf pedagogy and its philosophical background. In addition to polemical attacks on Steiner and anthroposophy, satire and irony have been common genres of criticism. In our examination of how Waldorf education has been described, debated, and criticised within the framework of the Norwegian public discourse, in the media, newspapers, and other debate fora, we have limited ourselves to take a closer look at certain selected debates that highlight important aspects of the discourse.

Satire, Irony, and Self-Deprecation

Anthroposophy, eurythmy, and Waldorf education have remained subjects of satirical humour from Steiner's time up to the present day. Not infrequently, caricatured representations of eurythmy are used in humorous or satirical contexts. Eurythmic movements are easy to caricature but difficult to explain and are, therefore, often used as an example of the incomprehensible in both the ideas and the practice. Often, the satire contains elements from all three themes, either explicitly or as understatement, and self-deprecating jokes are a part of it (AntroPost, 2008; NRK, 2022; YouTube, 2015, August 15).

A classic example of a polemical-satirical approach to anthroposophy and anthroposophists is the well-known philosopher Gunnar Skirbekk, who, after first giving a factual presentation of the problem field of anthroposophy and science, then characterises the anthroposophists themselves:

What, in theory, should be “spiritual science” turns out to be neither spirit nor science. Like a half-wild Indian tribe, the anthroposophists dance their senseless war dance through Norwegian cultural life. Without petty regard for abilities and facilities, they elegantly and scornfully skip over all detailed research and “narrowed” specialisation, and superbly, they draw up the big lines and powerful answers.

(Skirbekk, 1958, pp. 73–76)

Humour is played out within a context people are familiar with. A shared frame of reference is needed to make what is intended to trigger laughter feel relevant. That begs the question: What is the frame of reference in the Norwegian public sphere and the media that means that humour based on anthroposophy, eurythmy, and Waldorf education is perceived as funny? It is not easy to give an unambiguous answer, but based on the material we have examined, we see the tendency for the subject to be portrayed as unscientific and characterised by an absence of critical reflection, as naïve, overly sensitive, vague, spiritual, and as opposed to a rational and more “normal” understanding of the world. In other words, it is a phenomenon that many people find relevant to ridicule.

Ridicule and Generalisation

Much of the media debate on Waldorf education and anthroposophy has been very heated. When the anthroposophical movement in Norway celebrated the centenary of Steiner's first visit to Norway in 2008, Norway's biggest newspaper *Verdens Gang* (VG), dedicated its entire front page to Steiner. It showed a blackboard drawing by Steiner where he had drawn four body types intended to illustrate the four classic temperaments (Ertesvåg, 2008a, p. 1). The drawing was taken from a book by Steiner that was on the RSUC

syllabus (Steiner, 1997, p. 34). The heading above the illustration, in capital letters, was: “Waldorf schools believe the body reveals your personality”. A two-page article in the newspaper claimed that RSUC students were encouraged to use their practical training periods “to observe pupils’ physical appearance and gait”. Peder Haug, a high-profile professor of education, was interviewed in the same article, and he took a sceptical view of such an observational practice (in Ertesvåg, 2008a, pp. 8–9) Bård Vegar Solhjell, then minister of education, was “shocked” that Rudolf Steiner University College “in 2008 bases parts of its teaching on unscientific theories and prehistoric speculations about the nature of human beings”. He found it “reprehensible” and expected RSUC to change its practical training manual (Ertesvåg, 2008b, p. 10). Several comments followed in the wake of this newspaper story, some of which tried to counter the impression it had left. Already the following day, RSUC’s general manager Marianne Tellmann assured readers that the first rule of a good pupil observation is that it should be “loving and non-judgemental”. That physical appearance is also included in a multidimensional field of observation “does not in any way form a basis for making judgements about personality” (Tellmann, 2008, p. 47). Parents of Waldorf school pupils, including Margit Slagsvold (priest and sociologist) and her husband Jonas Gahr Støre (then Minister of Foreign Affairs, now Prime Minister), tried to nuance the criticism. Slagsvold did not wish to dismiss it but found it “problematic when the media focus becomes so unilaterally negative that it seems more like a campaign than critical journalism” (Ertesvåg, 2008c, p. 26).

In the spring of 2010, two books about Waldorf schools in Norway were published. The first book to be published was by married couple Kristin A. Sandberg and Trond O. Kristoffersen, who had experience as both teachers and parents from the Waldorf school in Moss. The essence of the criticism was that Waldorf schools keep their underlying philosophy, namely anthropology, hidden, thus preventing parents who are considering sending their children to a Waldorf school from making an informed decision. A quotation from the book reflects their own situation but also generalises:

Many [Waldorf school] critics . . . have such a bad experience of the Steiner Waldorf movement that they notify the supervisory authorities and other parents who have been seduced by the façade that the Waldorf school presents. People have experienced that the Waldorf schools treat the movement’s critics in a cult-like manner and have an agenda that goes beyond education in the traditional sense of the word.

(Sandberg & Kristoffersen, 2010, p. 17)

One example of Sandberg and Kristoffersen’s ironic and satirical generalisations about an entire educational community is the following description of how representatives of the Waldorf school think: “We believe in

a prophet who thought about all things to do with the past life, this life, and future lives. He has written a great deal about this, and we wish to call it science since we believe it to be true” (Sandberg & Kristoffersen, 2010, p. 17). The two authors also called for scientific and critical thinking among anthroposophists. However, according to Stabel, who wrote an article in the newspaper *Dagbladet*, the authors portrayed Waldorf educators as a uniform group and fell for the temptation to draw definite conclusions on an insufficient basis (Stabel, 2010). Although some anthroposophists and Waldorf educators have made statements that resemble the portrayal by Sandberg and Kristoffersen, Stabel pointed out that there is no certain, research-based knowledge of what the Waldorf community currently thinks and believes *as a group* (Stabel, 2010).

Another book, edited by Svein Bøhn, Cato Schiøtz and Peter Normann Waage (all with ties to Waldorf schools), was published at about the same time Sandberg and Kristoffersen published their book (Bøhn et al., 2010). In one of the articles in the book, Schiøtz thematised the criticism of the Waldorf school (Schiøtz, 2010, pp. 156–169). He characterises the criticism as “harsh and uncompromisingly polemical” criticism from “frustrated teachers . . . online”, a clear reference to Sandberg and Kristoffersen and to the VG newspaper story that “Waldorf schools build on pre-scientific ideas and equate body/behaviour with character traits to much too great an extent” (Schiøtz, 2010, p. 164). The main trend in this criticism, Schiøtz points out, is that Waldorf education is based on ideas that are “unscientific . . . and in this context [criticism] regularly draws attention to [Steiner’s views on] the temperaments, reincarnation, seven-year periods and other aspects of Steiner’s metaphysical universe” (Schiøtz, 2010, p. 163). Schiøtz’s overview of the criticism is based on extensive collected material, including two master’s degree projects, one about Waldorf education from a parental perspective and one on social conflicts in Waldorf schools (Eriksen, 2008; Rebnor, 2008). At the same time, Schiøtz points out that there is one group of critics that are not particularly visible, namely the education professionals. Schiøtz calls for general educational research on and an educational analysis of the elements that are particular to Waldorf education (Schiøtz, 2010).

The next wave of public criticism of Steiner hit Norway a year later, while the 150th anniversary of Steiner’s birth was being celebrated both in Norway and in much of the rest of the world. On 11th March 2011, the front page of the weekly magazine *Ny Tid* [New Times] featured a portrait of Rudolf Steiner in a golden frame accompanied by the words: “The Steiner rule. It is 150 years since this Austrian’s birth. This is how Rudolf Steiner influences the Royal House, the Government and Store Norske Leksikon [The great Norwegian Encyclopaedia]”. The magazine contained a nine-page story with illustrations, photos, and text. A two-page spread featured a large spider’s web with a photo of Steiner in the centre, surrounded by photos of

Norwegian cultural personalities, politicians, and royals. The following is quoted from the accompanying text:

Last week, the 150th anniversary of Rudolf Steiner's birth was celebrated. His philosophy is more widespread in Norway than anywhere else. The royal family, the prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs, lawyers, banks, the Christian Community, and writers are all part of the Steiner movement's network.

(Tumyr Nilsen, 2011)

The story led to a heated debate, the most dramatic consequence of which was that, just under a year later, the Norwegian encyclopaedia replaced the person responsible for the anthroposophy entries. Cato Schiøtz, an anthroposophist and a high-profile Norwegian lawyer of national renown (who, according to the *Ny Tid* story, was a key part of the Steiner movement's network), was dismissed and replaced by historian of ideas Jan-Erik Ebbestad Hansen. The encyclopaedia's editor, Anne Marit Godal, said that "It was not proper for a prominent anthroposophist such as Cato Schiøtz to be responsible for entries on anthroposophy" (Tumyr Nilsen, 2012). This change led to further debate, including in academic circles. Sociologist and historian of ideas Rune Slagstad claimed that Ebbestad Hansen could not be considered impartial in the role either.

Once you go as far as to relieve a person of this responsibility because he is deemed to be biased, does it make sense to replace him with someone who, although a professor, is also undoubtedly biased but negatively so? (Slagstad, 2014, p. 27)

The discussion continued in different fora and different forms.

If we take a closer look at the criticism levelled at anthroposophy and Waldorf schools in the past two or three years, there is one topic that stands out: the claim that conspiracy theories are being spread in the anthroposophical community and at Waldorf schools. The topic came up in connection with the debate on the authorities' handling of the coronavirus pandemic, in particular, the recommendations to take the vaccines and conspiracy theory perspectives in this debate. Ebbestad Hansen claimed "conspiracy theories are a striking feature of the anthroposophical movement". Hansen writes that some German Waldorf schools have "distanced themselves from" conspiracy theories and other "dark sides of anthroposophy". However, he concludes that "as far as I am aware, we have not seen a similar trend in Norway. Instead, conspiracy theories seem to be flourishing"¹ (Ebbestad Hansen, 2021, pp. 188–190).

1 After the criticism from Ebbestad Hansen, the (self) critical-investigative article "Anthroposophy and conspiracy thinking" has been published in the journal *Samtiden* (August, 2023). The author of the article, Frode Barkved, teaches at RSUC and has long been associated with the anthroposophical movement.

A similar criticism against the Waldorf school community surfaced in February and March of 2022 in a debate in the press. In one of several articles, former Waldorf pupils (generally positive about Waldorf education) Bjart Holtsmark and Sven Holtsmark wrote that the anthroposophical community suffers from “a fundamental reluctance to really confront conspiratorial ideas” and that this “reflects” a “fundamental problem among a number of anthroposophists: an understanding of history as an expression of a struggle between different ‘forces’ that work through individual and collective actors”. The two writers pointed out that, starting from such a view, “it is no great stretch to see history and society as being controlled by conspiracies” (Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 2022, March 10, p. 29). In a previous contribution about conspiracy theories and opposition to vaccination, they wrote that they do not know “how strong the position of extreme opponents of vaccination is in the Norwegian Steiner movement – but they make their presence felt, including in the schools”. They also provide examples of how a named Waldorf school teacher “through his chains of erroneous inferences and lies” contributed to “people living today actually believing that the Covid-19 vaccines cause mass death”. Finally, they urge the boards of the *Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in Norway* and the *Anthroposophical Society in Norway* to

publicly and unambiguously distance themselves from the extreme vaccine opponents in the movement. They should make it clear that their destructive ideas and lies have no place, neither in the classrooms of the Waldorf schools nor elsewhere in the Norwegian anthroposophical movement.
(Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 2022, pp. 18–19)

Chairman of *The Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in Norway*, Gry Alsos, made a public statement that the question of vaccination did not fall within the scope of Waldorf education but was the parents’ responsibility. The Waldorf schools cooperate with the authorities and comply with official advice, she said (Alsos, 2022, p. 23). It should be added that scepticism and also opposition to vaccination in the Waldorf education community is not a new issue, and nor is it limited to Norway. What is new is that the situation came to a head during two years of the pandemic and lockdowns, and vaccine scepticism became more associated with conspiracy theories and extreme right-wing groups (Barkved, 2022; Eggen, 2022).

The Internal Discourse

Considering how small in number the anthroposophy and Waldorf education movement in Norway actually is, the level of dissemination activity has been and is surprisingly high. It takes the form of lectures, exhibitions, fairs, and large and small publications by members of the Waldorf school community (Stabel, 2016). A web-based internal newsletter published by *Dialogos Media and Resource Centre*, gives its subscribers a weekly overview of most

of the activities and publications in anthroposophical and Waldorf education enterprises in Norway (Dialogos, medie- og ressurscenter, nyhetsbrev, n.d.). The weekly news reflects the existing activities and debates, but it is merely an information channel and not a participant in the Waldorf education discourse. Clearer actors in the discourse are the Waldorf education journal, *Steinerbladet* [hereafter referred to as the *Waldorf Magazine*] which has a public profile but is mainly read by parents and teachers at Waldorf schools and by students at RSUC, and the internal publication, *Meddelelser til skolens medarbeidere* [hereafter referred to as *News for school staff*]. We consider these two publications to be the most important arenas for internal discourse on Waldorf education in Norway, and we have, therefore, chosen to examine them in more detail.

The Waldorf Magazine

The *Waldorf Magazine* is distributed to all parents whose children attend Waldorf schools and kindergartens in Denmark and Norway. It has a print run of nearly 10,000, and it publishes four issues a year. The digital archive contains 4,019 articles by 1,332 authors published in 429 issues (*Steinerbladet*, Pedagogikk, Samfunn, Kultur, n.d.). The articles are made available to researchers and others interested by a request to the editors.

Waldorf Magazine is primarily a forum for communicating the practical tradition in Waldorf education. The articles describe intentions and experience from work in kindergartens and schools, reflections on the need for innovation, and examples of new methods and projects. There is a clear line of continuity from the first small publications to the current journal in terms of the intention to communicate enthusiasm for and knowledge of Waldorf education – primarily to people who have chosen this direction but also to others. The texts reflect a desire to justify the place of Waldorf education under shifting educational policy regimes (Stabel, 2016). Many articles refer to Steiner's lectures as an inspiration for educational innovation. Although the journal has published articles that look at Waldorf schools in a critical light, there has been little academic, critical, and self-critical discussion of the philosophy underlying Waldorf education (Stabel, 2016). The use and interpretation of Steiner's texts have been considered an individual matter, and there are no signs of a common approach to how Steiner's works should, could, or ought to be interpreted. Different ways of reading Steiner have existed side by side in the journal's texts (Stabel, 2016). The criticism that emerged in the internal journal around the turn of the millennium revolved around the question of whether the distinctive nature of Waldorf education was clear enough, whether the quality of teaching was satisfactory, whether pupils learnt enough, and how well the teachers were able to handle criticism. Criticism was also made of the management culture and the way the schools are governed. The sharpest and most extensive criticism was formulated in Kaj Skagen's (2004) article *Slik dør Steinerskolen* [This is how the

Waldorf school dies] (Skagen, 2004). The article marked the beginning of a long, sometimes heated, debate, first in the journal, later in the wider public domain.

In the past 10–15 years, there have been few signs of debate in *Waldorf Magazine*. In addition to articles and stories about educational practices, there are also some scholarly articles of a more academic nature that contain references to other specialist and research literature. Overall, the magazine provides a broad picture of a diverse field of practice and ideas and thoughts related to these practices in the Waldorf education community in Denmark and Norway. References to Steiner's perspectives and literature on Waldorf education show that there is still an attachment to the original underlying philosophy and that it remains a source of inspiration, while references to more recent research show that Waldorf educators also take inspiration from sources outside the Waldorf education context. This could help to legitimise their practice.

News for School Staff

The internal Waldorf education journal *News for School Staff* is published (now digitally) by the *Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in Norway* once or twice a year. A review of the internal journal from the past 15–20 years shows that it has changed both in form and content. At the beginning of the new millennium, it served as an internal organ for organisational and professional issues and a forum for reflections on the foundation of Waldorf education: anthroposophy. Work on anthroposophy was addressed through the publication of contributions from meetings, contributions from teachers, and texts, lectures, and articles from the international Waldorf school community. Today, *News for School Staff* is primarily a forum for discussing the distinctive nature of Waldorf education, the basis for its legitimacy, and challenges related to changing framework conditions.

In recent years, three topics have been repeatedly addressed in the journal. They are 1. the place and importance of anthroposophy in the work of Waldorf schools and how it can form part of the basis for the legitimacy of Waldorf education today, 2. eurythmy as a school subject, and 3. challenges relating to the schools' organisation and management. For reasons of space, we have chosen to examine only the first of these topics. The ideas underlying Waldorf education and the debate about their interpretation have been debated both internally and in the wider public sphere. How this was dealt with illustrates the tensions between tradition and renewal in the school movement.

About Anthroposophy

In a 1994 contribution to *News for the School Staff* written by Stein Schage, a Child Psychiatrist and a Waldorf school doctor questioned the scientific

basis of anthroposophy and how it was used in the schools. Under the heading “Our challenges”, he asked whether the Waldorf school movement “has managed to persuade itself of the scientific basis of anthroposophy – and whether our way of thinking and use of language reflects a methodical scientific awareness” (Schage, 1994, p. 1). He did not give an unequivocal answer but considered it problematic when anthroposophy becomes “fixed conceptions, rules for living, and a substitute for religion” (Schage, 1994). He pointed out that this development prevents innovation and causes problems in more than one way.

Schage’s contribution foreshadowed the criticism aimed at the Waldorf education community a decade later. Perhaps the failure to address Schage’s questions in 1994 was a contributory cause of the wave of criticism that washed over the Waldorf schools. The criticism was extensive and challenging for everyone who worked in Waldorf education. Many teachers felt that their enthusiasm, joy, and professional pride were under threat. Consideration for the schools’ internal life as well as their public reputation made it necessary to give thorough consideration to how the criticism was dealt with as well as to Waldorf education’s distinctive nature, tradition, and renewal, and, not least, its relationship with its underlying ideas. Work was done on these issues among each school’s teaching staff at conferences and joint teacher meetings. *The Association of Waldorf Schools in Norway* wished to encourage “reflection on our practice” and organised a conference called *Distinctiveness and Renewal* in Oslo in the spring of 2011. Proposed study material was distributed, and everyone who attended was invited to discuss the following questions:

- Can Waldorf schools be regarded as faith schools? What perspectives support such a claim, and what, if any, refute it?
- What is the relationship between anthroposophy and Waldorf education?
- Is it possible, in principle, to justify Waldorf education without reference to Steiner? Is it desirable to do so?
- How can we achieve development and renewal without losing our distinctive nature?

Much of the material presented in lectures, talks, and the minutes from group work at the conference was published in *News for the School Staff* (2011/46) and debated in the following two issues (47, 48) without any form of conclusion being reached. The problems relating to anthroposophy and Waldorf education were also the topic at Waldorf teacher conferences in the autumn of 2015 and in 2017. In 2015, Markus Lindholm of RSUC gave a lecture in which he argued that Steiner’s research and results did not meet the current requirements for scientific work and that the failure to acknowledge this placed Waldorf education outside the general educational discourse. He also said that Waldorf education can manage without the results of Steiner’s spiritual science and the esoteric dimension of anthroposophy. According to

Lindholm, the values of the deep humanism that Steiner formulated and the methods the school has developed over the years are sufficient to justify the educational approach (Lindholm, 2015). At the Waldorf teacher conference two years later, Erik Marstrander, in a lecture, claimed – unlike Lindholm – that anthroposophy was a key part of the underlying ideas and inspiration behind Waldorf education and that it was, therefore, necessary to continue to work on it (Marstrander, 2017). Following the 2017 conference, the *Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in Norway* devised a strategy for work on the issue going forward. The strategy included both individual teachers and the teachers at each school collectively, as well as the Waldorf school movement. Extensive work was carried out at the schools. As an important element of this effort, the *Association of Steiner Waldorf Schools in Norway* proposed that funds should be set aside for work aimed at clarifying “the theoretical basis for Waldorf education, such as its views of learning, the individual and the development of the child. This could, for example, be achieved through research projects supported by the Association” (Thaulow, 2017, p. 12). As far as we can tell, this plan has not yet been realised.

The contributions and debates at conferences and meetings in 2011, 2015, and 2017 show that the Waldorf education community is divided in its views on whether and to what extent Steiner’s texts can be used. One group emphasises that working on anthroposophy can inspire the development of individual teachers, including their creativity, alertness, and educational judgement. Those writing from this position emphasise their interpretations of Steiner’s texts and their own experience. A critical and contextual reading of Steiner’s texts is not a particular focus in this approach. The other group considers critical and contextual reading to be crucial. Unless the Waldorf education community is willing to engage in work of this kind, it will be challenging to communicate with other educational communities. This will lead to what Lindholm described as “marginalisation” (Lindholm, 2015). According to representatives of this second position, the Waldorf schools will not be taken seriously in the general educational discourse unless the community actively communicates that they are aware that Steiner’s philosophy of science arose in a different time, that some aspects of his thinking are therefore no longer relevant, and that parts of his work may be outdated. There are nuances within each of the two main positions, and it is also possible to infer a third point of view that would enable a critical, contextual reading to be combined with the continued use of Steiner’s texts as a source of inspiration in the schools’ work. Arve Mathisen of RSUC has advocated such views in several articles, including *Art makes sense 2*, which triggered extensive debate within the Waldorf education community as in an article on how he teaches students at RSUC anthroposophy (Mathisen, 2004, 2011).

The debates on anthroposophy’s place in *News for the School Staff* have had a relatively small number of participants. Many of the same names appear again and again, and they are all teachers with long-standing experience in both anthroposophy and Waldorf education. Despite the editors encouraging

new writers to submit contributions, both by extending invitations in editorials and actively reaching out in emails and through personal contact, it has been difficult to get more teachers to contribute.

Concluding Comments

Our study has shown that the Waldorf educational approach in the internal discourse in *Waldorf Magazine* is portrayed as a vital and engaging educational alternative. Arts and crafts subjects and an emphasis on the ecological perspective are important. The educational approach itself is not being debated. What is communicated serves the purpose of informing people about and maintaining enthusiasm for Waldorf education, but the information has limited reach outside the Waldorf education community.

Waldorf education and anthroposophy receive little attention in academia except from what is being done at RSUC. This institution, therefore, plays an important role in the academic discourse, and the master's degree programme may prove particularly important. It is also important that RSUC prioritises research on Waldorf education and examines the place and significance of anthroposophy for educators today. Since other universities and university colleges do not focus much on these areas, it is even more important that RSUC does so.

Waldorf education receives little attention in the media discourse. But anthroposophy and interpretation of it and the use of this philosophy as the legitimisation of it is more often covered by the media. Ironic comments about what is considered to be a lack of critical reflection within the Waldorf education community, which partly is right, are frequently made. Generalising statements about the community are also common. For the most part, it is the movement's critics that set the agenda for this discourse, while representatives of the Waldorf education community become involved in defending it and are on the defensive from the outset. Relatively few people take part in this discourse.

Debates on anthroposophy and how it can legitimise Waldorf education practices are also seen in the internal discourse in *News for the School Staff*. There is clear friction and disagreement about whether preservation or renewal is the right path. The positions, both in internal debates and in media debates, appear to have remained relatively unchanged over the past 10 or 15 years. It is demanding for a professional community that the same topics are debated again and again without any change taking place. It makes the community vulnerable and affects the profession's understanding of itself. People may begin to feel that they represent a movement that is naive, outdated, and even suspect rather than a recognised educational approach working to meet contemporary challenges.

The spiritual aspects of human beings that Steiner described and that he considered an important corrective to what he saw as the dangers of a

one-sidedly materialistic view of humanity and the world have been such a major influence on the development of the educational approach, constantly need to be communicated and debated in new, critical and relevant ways. The sometimes naive and uncritical approach to Steiner's work does not suffice when faced with justifiably critical public opinion. More critical and contextual debate is needed on what aspects of Steiner's texts can still inspire Waldorf educators. This is a huge and complex task, but it may, in our opinion, reduce the media criticism and clarify the internal discussions, maybe even make them redundant. Hopefully, this will contribute to a greater interest in Waldorf pedagogical practice.

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6 The Steiner Schools in Switzerland. With Regard to *Reformpädagogik*¹

Jürgen Oelkers

Preconditions

The “Waldorf schools” in Switzerland are called “Rudolf Steiner schools”. Historiographically, they are not closely linked to *Reformpädagogik* [reform pedagogy], which, at least in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, never played the role it did in the Netherlands, in England, or especially in Germany. In French-speaking Switzerland, there was an influential movement referring to *Reformpädagogik* centred in Geneva and oriented toward Jean Piaget but not guided by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner (cf. Bürkler, 2022). The current position of Steiner schools must be understood against the background of the Swiss school system and its particularities. The distinction from Steiner’s child-centred liberal *Reformpädagogik* must also be taken into account because today’s school reforms in Switzerland have no relation to Steiner’s pedagogy but are rather influenced by the principles of the developmental psychological child orientation that emerged in Geneva’s variety of *Reformpädagogik*. The Waldorf educators are not among the authoritative players in pedagogical Switzerland who have developed as a group in a differentiated way and with whom the school has become an integral place of learning with many networks (Miller & Oelkers, 2023). On the contrary, today, they must try to keep up with developments in educational policy if they do not want to become even more marginalised. The world of anthropology is also largely closed off in Switzerland, as it is in many other places. An educational offer is available in many places, but it is also fragile because of the fees and effort required from the parents. Unlike in Germany, parents with an anthroposophical background often choose the respective kindergartens and schools for their children. The problem of the schools is to expand this circle and to advance their development. The development requirement

1 In translating the chapter, we [MFB; AKH] deliberately chose to retain the term *Reformpädagogik*, since Oelkers refers to the perception of Waldorf education in the context of a specifically German-speaking tradition of schooling. In our introduction to this anthology, we briefly refer to the historical and conceptual differences (however small they may be) between *Reformpädagogik*, progressive education, and *éducation nouvelle*.

is no different from the state schools. Only the framework conditions are completely different.

The Swiss School System

The school system in Switzerland differs from that in Germany in important respects. Although state education in both countries is organised on a federal basis, unlike in Austria or France, there are serious differences, which have not only to do with size and the clearly different, namely republican history,² but must also be understood from their own legal prerequisites.

Compulsory schooling on the German model with fixed assignments of pupils does not exist in all cantons (= member states within the *Swiss Confederation*); some provide for compulsory teaching, which is, however, tied to teaching certificates, which – unlike in Austria, for example – limits home-schooling. The state obligation also does not extend to the age of 18, as in Germany, but to the age of 15. This means that both *Gymnasien* [high schools] and vocational schools are not part of compulsory education, or in the case of *Gymnasien*, only to a limited extent. Most *Gymnasien* last four years, but in rural cantons, as well as in cities such as Zurich or Winterthur, there are *Gymnasien* lasting six years alongside those lasting four. The six-year ones have their own entrance level, often called *Untergymnasium*, which has its own curriculum. Switzerland does not have any nine-year *Gymnasien*, and thus, no political discussions about the “turbo A-levels” as in Germany, which did not want to see the length of schooling affected. The Swiss high school graduation rate was 26.9% nationwide in the 2018 school year, while that of basic vocational education was 63.5%. The numbers are largely stable. The target for high school graduation at the end of upper secondary school nationwide is 95% of a cohort. The *Swiss Federal Statistical Office* described the situation at the end of 2020 as follows:

The rate for women is almost 4 percentage points higher than for men. Proportionally, more women than men complete general education at upper secondary level, while men are more likely to complete basic vocational education. With a rate of 93.4%, Swiss-born men and women are closest to the 95% target. However, it is still out of reach for foreign-born men and women, whose rate is 76.6%.³

2 For the canton of Zurich: Lengwiler et al. (2007).

3 Bundesamt für Statistik (2022). *Sekundarstufe II: Abschlussquote* [Upper Secondary: Graduation Rate]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805055923/www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/bildungsindikatoren/themen/bildungserfolg/abschlussquote-sekii.html> (memento from 2023, August 5).

This and all other quotations are originally written in German and, like the contribution as a whole, have been translated by the editors. Any misleading and/or ambiguous wording is therefore the sole responsibility of the publishers and not the author.

Despite increased demand for high school diplomas, especially in urban regions, which also explains the cantonal differences, the axis of the initial education system is still that between elementary school and dual vocational education. Regarding public perception and also in view of the opportunities associated with it, completing a vocational apprenticeship is anything but inferior. A good two-thirds of a year's cohort graduate from a vocational school, and the education policy strategy is to keep the number of "drop-outs" as low as possible. Every degree should and must lead to a follow-up education. The tiered system is permeable, but additional credits can be required in *Passerellen* [transitional passages] for the transitions.

The proportion of private school children is comparatively low. Almost 95% of children attend public institutions. The proportion of around 6% across all types of schools has remained virtually unchanged between the 2010/2011 and 2021/2022 school years, so the distribution of school attendance is very stable.⁴ Private schools receive only small state subsidies, and legally secured "substitute schooling" as in Germany is unknown. Therefore, those who choose a Rudolf Steiner school for their children must contribute to the full costs and can only expect graduate school fees according to income. The school fees amount to 15% of the relevant income and 0.6% of the taxable assets. There is no mode of financing as in the German *Ersatzbeschulung* [substitute schooling].

Compulsory schooling is age-dependent and also applies to children without regular residence status. Children of parents who cannot stay in Switzerland must also receive education. These do not wait for a place in school that can never be used. The private schools, however, are hardly affected by this.

The term "elementary school" is understood quite differently in the individual school laws of the cantons. However, the federal government sets the framework, which provides for 11 school years that fall under the compulsory system. The distribution of the school years among the levels differs.⁵ Enrolment begins at age four and initially requires attendance at kindergarten or preschool for two years. Both are not voluntary and are, therefore, free of charge. At the mostly private daycare programs, however, parents have to pay for the programs before compulsory schooling. Kindergarten or preschool is followed by six years of elementary school and three years of secondary school. The term *Volksschule* [elementary school] traditionally refers to the unity of primary and secondary school, although some school laws also include kindergarten or preschool. The transition to secondary school takes place without

4 Statista Research Department (2023). *Anteil der Privatschulen in der Schweiz bis 2021/2022* [Share of Public Schools in Switzerland Until 2021/2022]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805061215/https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/308289/umfrage/anteil-der-privatschueler-in-der-schweiz/> (retrieved June 7, 2021; memento from 2023, August 5).

5 The *Eidgenössische Konferenz der kantonalen Erziehungsdirektoren* (EDK) [Federal Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education], based in Bern, is responsible for the recognition of degrees.

exams. In secondary schools, students are usually divided into different performance groups,⁶ which can be switched between during the course of schooling depending on the learning level reached. Maintenance costs are covered by the municipalities, which are also responsible for the schools. Teachers' salaries are a matter for the cantons, and they are not uniform. The resources and equipment of the schools also differ, but the investments are consistently higher than in Germany or Austria. Elementary schools are a location factor, especially for rural communities. The integration of schools or even their closure is decided by the communities, which have every interest in maintaining their schools. There is no legal distinction between "internal" and "external" school matters in Switzerland. School supervision is in the hands of the municipalities, which delegate it to democratically elected school commissions or school boards. In this sense, it is a lay supervision, which is supplemented by cantonal authorities. Together with the schools, the supervisory authority advertises the positions and hires the teachers.

The first selection takes place at the end of elementary school. The children, in other words, attend an eight-year comprehensive school from kindergarten onward. Almost always, kindergartens and elementary schools are also housed in a common location and completed new construction projects such as the city of Zurich's *Schule im Birch* also runs the secondary school at the same location.⁷ With the transition to secondary school, students are prepared for the subsequent phases. *Gymnasien* have differently designed entrance exams, and vocational training programs require successful completion of secondary school, although apprenticeship contracts with companies are usually signed beforehand. Secondary schools thus prepare students for the choice of a profession and high school, but they finish with their own degrees, so they are not subcontracting institutions. Within this framework, the Steiner schools play the role of an additional offer that can be freely chosen and must be financed by the students themselves. The schools are not perceived as a big alternative to the state system because satisfaction with the public offers is high. Subsequent phases are given, youth unemployment is extremely low, and few parents are looking for a way out of the state offer. There are legally anchored participation rights for parents. Free schools also experience little demand and, again, tender only a niche offering. The reasons for this are the low profile of *Reformpädagogik* in the Swiss educational discourse and the public school inspectorate, which is also responsible for experimental schools. Reforms, for example, with "self-organised learning",

6 In most cases, three performance levels are distinguished. In the canton of Zurich, teachers and parents jointly decide on the allocation based on the available data. If they do not agree, the school board, which is locally responsible for the secondary school, decides.

7 City of Zurich (n.d.). <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805063206/www.stadt-zuerich.ch/schulen/de/imbirch.html> (memento from 2023, August 5).

take place in the system and are, therefore, controlled and do not allow glorification of big names or ideas (Miller & Oelkers, 2022).

The Waldorf Schools in *Reformpädagogik*

Often, Waldorf schools are seen as an integral part, if not a core element, of *Reformpädagogik*. This attribution is not universally true but can be understood as a historiographical crystallisation. Most alternative schools from the first half of the 20th century have disappeared or survived only, like the Summerhill school, in isolated instances or with conceptual skins. Uninterrupted and strong lines of reception can be traced to two approaches in particular. The pedagogy of Maria Montessori and that of Rudolf Steiner have been able to establish themselves widely, despite decisive criticism, because an organisation of both expansive business development and teacher training are associated with them. This is not nearly true of Freinet's pedagogy, nor has pedagogy based on the Dalton Plan experienced a comparable reception.

Decisive for the success of the Montessori and Steiner schools was a business idea, private financing, and the generation of demand, for which the valued term *Reformpädagogik* was useful. This term assumes a singled-out era and singled-out figures along with their exclusive discoveries, thus following a particular historiography. This reference is at the same time a classification, and this coincides with the self-view of the founders. Rudolf Steiner always saw himself as a spiritual as well as pedagogical solitaire, and Maria Montessori then saw herself as the authority of the "child-centred" movement, not as one among many. This explains why no attempt was ever made to merge the various approaches. They remained ideally as well as nominally dependent on the founders and shaped their own "brand" or trademark in competition. But what constitutes each pedagogy has multiple influences and thus a context of the constitution that must be distinguished from the history of reception. Neither Montessori's sensualism nor Steiner's concepts of spiritual education are their own inventions and stand outside of history. With their claims to originality, Montessori and Steiner took advantage of the opportunities to found their own organisation, presupposing a radical critique of schools, which neither of them founded but which they adopted and developed. Steiner adopted his educational concepts in part from Austrian Herbartianism, not only epochal teaching but also the unconditional primacy of the individual (Krieg, 2004, pp. 212–222). Related to this was Herbart's critique of the nationalisation of education. Montessori's Roman lectures on pedagogical anthropology are indebted to contemporary medicine, especially biometry or pedometry (as is also the case with Ovide Decroly) (Harnisch, 2012).

The question would then be why they are counted as part of *Reformpädagogik* at all and how this attribution came about. They became part of the epoch term *Reformpädagogik* in the course of an ongoing discussion about the "new education" by interested historiography, which defined the boundaries between old and new education in the interwar period, as could

be shown in summary, for example, by Angéla Medici's account of *éducation nouvelle* from 1940.⁸ In this framework, "child-centred pedagogy" is almost always communicated today with reference to Maria Montessori⁹ and Waldorf schools, which have been among the challenges to state pedagogy for 100 years, both of which they have successfully denigrated. Their pedagogies have influenced public expectations and have been heavily idealised in the discourse on alternative education. But curricula, teaching materials, and the methods of school-based instruction preclude much that can be desired, or that is expected of schools. They cannot be arbitrarily responsive to reform ideas. To put it the other way around, Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and the pedagogy associated with it are only applied in Waldorf schools without ever appearing there in pure form. One could, therefore, conclude that what is received corresponds to expectations, which in turn must be built up rhetorically. This would also apply vice versa: What is not further received has disappointed expectations. But how did *Reformpädagogik* become a public expectation with the profile of the better alternative?

This construction presupposes an epoch that, with its pedagogical achievements, is supposed to be exemplary to this day and is understood as the modernisation of education. But those who refer to it assume a canon or corpus of concepts that are limited and clearly distinguishable. They appear attractive because they are supposed to have practically shown how better education is not only possible but can also succeed and prevail. They can also be referred to because the historical distance does not have to be taken into account, and the developed school system tends to attract even more criticism today than it did at the beginning of the 20th century. The demand for an alternative school form often presupposes disappointments with the given forms. Connections seem to be easy, and the language immediately allows analogies to be made. In this sense, reception presupposes a search for alternatives and is aimed at confirming expectations. The recourse to the history of *Reformpädagogik* is synonymous with the assurance that we are dealing with a great tradition from which better concepts for education and teaching can be determined in the long run.

Despite research to the contrary, the main line of reception still follows the standard historiography and its canon of approaches or big names. This overlooks continuities of pedagogical reflection and other innovations of practice, which become apparent if one extends the period and does not assume a short but heroic epoch. This is true, for example, of the project method of teaching that emerged in the 18th century, the psychology of problem-solving, or even

8 Angéla Medici (1902–2001) was herself an activist. She founded an école active in Saint-Cloud (*Hauts-de-Seines*) in 1938 and was a professor at the *Sorbonne* for a short time in 1943.

9 This is shown, for example, in the *Handbook of Montessori Education* (Murray et al., 2023). For weak empirical evidence, see the study by Marshall (2017).

the broad movement of school gardens that developed with the World's Fairs of the 19th century. The tradition of *Reformpädagogik* is supposed to be a fixed historical fact, but the “corpus” associated with it is a historiographical construct that makes for sharp preselection. Thus, anyone who receives “the *Reformpädagogik*” must reckon with the fact that much cannot be perceived that would also have fulfilled the criteria and yet was not observed or forgotten. Moreover, the contradictions cannot be overlooked. The rhetorical “child orientation” in Montessori does not fit the method of learning, which presupposes a didactic order that cannot be freely chosen or altered by the child. Steiner's school also follows a fixed order that does not allow for a say or even an objection. Eurythmy and epoch teaching, like Montessori's materials, make up the core of what is offered.

Reception is always also non-reception. And as is often the case with a canon, what is excluded is sometimes what is actually interesting. On the other hand, a canon is only effective if most of what could or should belong to it remains excluded. Thus, the main problem in reception is what is to be understood by *Reformpädagogik* and whether a concept beyond the canon is possible. The Steiner schools themselves have never felt committed to the canon.

Rudolf Steiner Schools in Switzerland

The history of Steiner pedagogy is linked to a worldwide expansion of private schools in the 20th and 21st centuries, which, however, as the *Berlitz Schools* or church schools, for example, show, can by no means be associated only with *Reformpädagogik* and which also served commercial goals.

In September 1919, the first Waldorf school was opened in Emil Molt's *Waldorf-Astoria* factory (Molt, 1972, pp. 202–210) in Stuttgart, the first Waldorf kindergarten followed in 1926. The beginnings were modest, and expansion did not set in until much later. A strategy of profit maximisation as a business model was and is excluded. In September 2022, the official *Waldorf World List* recorded 1,270 schools in 80 countries and 1,928 kindergartens in more than 70 countries. In May 2020, there were still 1,214 schools worldwide, with the list including more than just schools in the sense of compulsory education. Most Waldorf schools are in Germany (256), followed by the Netherlands (126) and the United States (124). Germany also has the most Waldorf kindergartens (591). In Switzerland, there are currently 32 schools and 71 kindergartens run according to Steiner principles (Waldorf World List, 2022, pp. 9–10). The number of students is declining slightly. While 5,520 students attended 30 Steiner schools in the 2010/2011 school year, there were 5,466 in 28 schools in the 2014/2015 school year.¹⁰ The

¹⁰ Rudolf Steiner Schulen (2015). *Statistikbericht der Stiftung zur Förderung der Rudolf Steiner Pädagogik* [Statistical Report of the Foundation for the Promotion of Rudolf Steiner

decline continues. Only 0.5% of all students in Switzerland (primary and secondary) currently attend Steiner schools.

The regulations for school fees vary within the general approach. The Steiner School in Bern currently has the following regulations: “Parents who make a contribution in excess of the calculated school fees, as a donation, thereby compensate for the contributions of families who cannot reach the calculated school fees”. For economic reasons, the school sets minimum contributions per family per month.

These are: up to 5th grade CHF 500.-, 6th to 9th grade CHF 650.-, from 10th grade CHF 800.-, with children in 2 multi-grade classes CHF 900.-. If the calculated school fee is lower than the minimum contribution, the minimum contribution is considered as the school fee. If the parents are not able to pay the minimum contribution from their own resources, they will look for support in their environment. If they still do not reach the minimum contribution, they can apply to the school’s sponsorship fund.¹¹

The same applies to school fees in the city of Zurich: each family pays 16.5% of its income, regardless of how many of its children attend school. Only in the case of a one-child family is the rate lower. The minimum amount per month is 686 Swiss francs, and the maximum is 2,820 (Hoffmeyer, 2023, May 23).

The history of Rudolf Steiner schools in Switzerland began in 1921 with an advanced training school at the Goetheanum in Dornach (canton of Solothurn). In 1926, the first Rudolf Steiner school was founded in the city of Basel, followed a year later by the foundation in the city of Zurich. It was not until 1945 that the next school was opened in Bern. From the dissolved *Rudolf Steiner School Schaffhausen*, a new and, so far, the last foundation emerged in 2017 (Brodbeck, 2022). The coverage of the schools in the Swiss media is not alarmist but rather well-meaning, also because it is about a practical alternative that is not perceived as an ideological danger. If that is suggested, the coverage is balanced to skeptical with regard to the esoteric elements in Steiner, for example, those related to ecological agriculture and its justifications (SRE, 2022, October 30). For a long time, there was simple disregard. If so, then mostly only a local consideration of the activity of individual schools could be proved. Without the umbrella organisation of Rudolf Steiner schools having its own public relations work, interest was rather limited, which has only changed in recent years.

Education]. https://web.archive.org/web/20230805094101/http://steinerschule.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2015_02_Statistik.pdf (memento from 2023, August 5).

11 Rudolf Steiner Schule Bern Ittigen Langnau (2018). *Schulgeldregelung der Rudolf Steiner Schule Bern Ittigen Langnau* [School Fee Regulations of the Rudolf Steiner School Bern Ittigen Langnau]. https://web.archive.org/web/20230805094256/www.steinerschule-bern.ch/wp-rss/wp-content/uploads/schulgeldregelung_neu_ab-schuljahr_2019-20.pdf (memento from 2023, August 5).

Most schools do not engage in Steiner exegesis because they have to be guided by practice and by coping with given problems. Therefore, only the core elements of pedagogy and school organisation are indispensable. Dogmatism never goes down well in Swiss education.

The big fights about anthroposophy, for example, about the racist statements in Steiner's work, are probably noticed (Strasser, 2021¹²; Kovce, 2021) but have not led to the schools being called into question. The choice of the parents is respected as a free decision, and as long as the welfare of the child is not violated, there is no general suspicion. The schools and the way they work are respected as an alternative offer. The orientation of the state school and the training of the teachers are not affected. Correspondingly, little attention is paid to the actual elements of anthroposophical education outside the narrow circle of Waldorf journalism. For example, what "eurythmy" is and what practice is associated with it is virtually unknown to the public. Also, the spiritual and even therapeutic expectations are hardly communicated to the outside. In a recent self-representation from Switzerland, a movement teaching is associated with it, which accompanies the learning week (Brodbeck & Thomas, 2019, pp. 116–123).

Little doubt is cast on the general pedagogical rhetoric. The credo for education should be: "Through experience to knowledge". The holistic view and promotion of the child are at the centre, i.e., not the usability for the state and society. Jonas Göttin, class tutor (7th grade) as well as a teacher for music and sports at the Rudolf Steiner school in Münchenstein (canton of Baselland),¹³ is "convinced of this pedagogy", according to Swiss television. The pedagogical means of the state school, which he once attended himself, "made little sense to me", he explains. Göttin graduated from the *Academy for Anthroposophical Pedagogy* in Dornach,¹⁴ where you "study to understand the nature of the child and its development". The studies cost 3,850 francs per semester, which is much more than at the state educational institutions. At the *Zurich University of Teacher Education*, the semester fees are currently 720 francs. In addition, wages at Steiner schools are lower than in public schools (Hoffmeyer, 2023). Today, Göttin is convinced that it takes "quite a few skills and a solid base of life experience" to fulfil the educational mission. "Because teachers take a central role at Steiner School". Over the years and across the grades, "the teacher becomes the caregiver who is to recognise and support the child in his or her individuality and uniqueness".¹⁵ However, the class teacher principle is a mainstay in the Swiss elementary school, which has no need of Steiner pedagogy. In the Swiss television report, the main topic is the practice of the schools: teaching is done in epoch lessons with epoch notebooks. Over three to four weeks, mathematics, for

12 36 comments from readers.

13 Rudolf Steiner Schule Münchenstein (n.d.). <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805094625/www.rssm.ch/ueber-uns/team> (memento from 2023, August 5).

14 Dornach is the seat of the *Anthroposophical Society* and the centre of the movement.

15 The class teacher designs the lessons (Brodbeck & Thomas, 2019, pp. 88–98).

example, is the focus. “This allows for immersion in a topic, but also promotes perseverance”. Topics are chosen according to the child’s developmental stage: “In 1st grade, for example, fairy tales; in 5th grade, the Greeks”.¹⁶ Numerical grades are rejected with arguments that are also used in state schools: “A grade reduces an achievement to a number, without a view to the child’s development. It increases pressure to perform and competitiveness”. The content of the lessons is presented by teachers themselves and they draw a lot on the blackboard – in a certain way following the example of Rudolf Steiner (1999). The central learning medium is the blackboard picture. The use of social media is frowned upon, but in the future, lessons are to be conducted en masse and, for certain subjects in the upper grades, digitised.¹⁷ In general, children “will be actively involved in the process, filling their notebooks and becoming creative or crafty”. There are no dropouts in the schools, and grades are introduced only in the final grades. The reform pedagogical polemics against frontal teaching are not shared. Modernisation efforts of Steiner’s pedagogy are constant, Göttin relates. “Difficulties arise when there is a lack of foresight and openness to really deal with the current challenges and when Steiner’s statements are dogmatically adhered to” (presentation and all quotations according to SRF, 2022, October 30).

There are also well-meaning reports about prospective teachers. Among them are those who strive for a change of system from elementary school to Steiner school. They undergo – at their own expense – a completely new education and are thus also a new category of lateral entrants, which has also been noted in Germany (Keller, 2008). The reasons for the rare change are mostly dissatisfaction with the state system. “In Waldorf education, the child is clearly at the centre”, says a student who previously taught at an elementary school for seven years. From the pedagogy lecture on dual education,¹⁸ the assignment is quoted as, “How do I get the child to learn independently?” (Hoffmeyer, 2023, May 23). But this means something quite different from “self-organised learning” in the state school, which is based on the dismantling of teacher-centredness and wants to take back authority. In Waldorf education, the teacher is central. Ideally, class teachers, depending on the school organisation, accompany the children for the first six to eight years in a full-time setting. They “teach a variety of subjects in the morning and usually without any textbooks at all” (Hoffmeyer, 2023, May 23). At least this is true for the lower grades (1st–6th grade).

A Zurich-based teacher states on Swiss television: “If a part of the anthroposophical teaching should flow in, then mainly in the preparation or vividly implemented in the lessons”. One element, he says, is Rudolf Steiner’s doctrine of temperaments, that is, the recasting of the ancient distinction between

16 This goes directly back to Herbart.

17 Based on the competence-oriented *Lehrplan 21* [Curriculum 21] of the state primary schools. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805095026/https://steinerschule.ch/lehrplan/> (memento from 2023, August 5).

18 Half school practice and half study from the beginning.

choleric, sanguinics, phlegmatics, and melancholics. “In order to recognise the predominant temperament, one would have to study the characteristic gestures and facial expressions closely” (Hoffmeyer, 2023, May 23). The doctrine of the four fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) and the four temperaments of the soul associated with them, which goes back to the Greek physician Hippocrates of Kos, has been a core tenet of medicine since antiquity and has therefore also been observed in pedagogy. Even the psychology of the Herbartians, thus a strong influence on Steiner, was influenced by the doctrine of the temperaments.¹⁹ In today’s personality psychology, this is hardly used anymore, except for the PEN model of personality developed by the heredity theorist Hans Jürgen Eysenck (1967).²⁰ Steiner sees in the four temperaments “ideal types”, which are supposed to have “karmic” causes and are associated with the incarnation teaching. In school practice, the teaching probably serves more to classify. The Zurich teacher says: “Children with the same temperament can be placed next to each other if necessary. That way, they should learn to deal with their temperament and develop in the process”. This has limits: if you put two “choleric” children next to each other, they would “rub off” on each other (Hoffmeyer, 2023, May 23). “Classification”, however, means more, namely, the permanent assignment of children to an invariant character image. The close study of “gestures and facial expressions” thus does not serve the individual child, but a schema which – also in dissociation from Eysenck – is no longer used in today’s personality psychology because it defies empirical verification and thus can only be used speculatively. The teaching of the four temperaments can be understood as a test of how far Waldorf education can develop.

Wolfgang Leonhardt (2016), a former school doctor from Pforzheim,²¹ interprets the temperaments in the anthroposophical journal *Erziehungskunst* as anthropological constants of life. Rudolf Steiner would refer to the “becoming human being”, not the one who has become. This future aspect is shown in the “four age temperaments: the sanguine one of childhood, the choleric one of youth, the melancholic one of life maturity and the phlegmatic temperament of the so-called old age”.²² Here, “the strong positive and future-oriented forces of the temperaments” are supposed to be hidden. These show up in the ages of life, another teaching that is hardly used anymore because here, again, a scheme comes into play, just stages and ages of life. But “regardless of the age of life, we always carry all four states

19 In Gustav Adolf Lindner’s textbook of psychology, the doctrine of temperaments is found in a central place, namely as a basic element in the structure of the soul (Lindner, 1858, pp. 27–29). There are also applications to education (as Dittmer, 1885).

20 The circle model has three dimensions that are linked to the four temperaments.

21 The general practitioner Wolfgang Leonhardt (born 1943) was a physician in Pforzheim since 1974. From 1999 to 2011, he was a school doctor at the *Goethe School*, a Waldorf school in Pforzheim. From 2011, he practised in Dresden and, since 2014, in Niederlausitz.

22 School principal Hermann Dittmer (1885, p. 13) from Norden had already claimed something similar.

within us. Even the school child carries something in himself of the youthful, mature and old man” (Leonhardt, 2016).²³ Any contemporary developmental psychology would disagree because childhood is divided into phases that are irreversible, internal states change, and maturity or ageing cannot be assigned to children. However, what Leonhardt called “becoming forces” (Leonhardt, 2016) serves again for schematisation. For the practice of education, a distinction should be made between children as ideal types:

- sanguine child: attention, impartiality, devotion;
- choleric child: initiative, determination, respectfulness;
- melancholic child: seriousness, devotion, compassion;
- phlegmatic child: calmness, objectivity, awareness of surroundings.

“The pedagogical measures Steiner recommends strengthen above all these future-oriented forces. Educators gain inner future and life force when they engage in them”. The scheme is, at the same time, intended to serve as a guide for teachers. “Each child’s temperament challenges other forces in educators and pedagogues:

- the sanguine: capacity for love, patient bearing;
- the choleric: self-control, steadfastness;
- the melancholic: will to help, compassion;
- the phlegmatic: presence of mind, inner power of attention.

“This makes education agile and fosters in the teacher qualities that activate his heart forces in a threefold way through direct engagement, interaction, and self-knowledge” (Leonhardt, 2016). Misbehaviour can thus be eliminated. On the other hand, no child can be pressed into such a scheme in the long run, either because the experience does not fit or the character picture does not allow a prognosis that would contradict it. This is also true for other models of personality psychology.²⁴

Outlook and Criticism

In November 2022, the business economist and Swiss Waldorf author Heinz Brodbeck, board member of the *Steiner Schools Switzerland*, again discussed in the magazine *Erziehungskunst*, the topic *Waldorfschulen in der Schweiz – Eine grosse Schulbewegung im Umbruch* [Waldorf Schools in Switzerland – A Great School Movement in Transition] (Brodbeck, 2022).²⁵ In the face of real shrinkages, the future of the movement should be at stake (see also

23 Thus already Lindner (1858, pp. 27–28).

24 The standard OCEAN model (the “big five”) distinguishes “Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism” as universal dimensions of character.

25 All quotes in what follows refer to this.

Brodbeck & Thomas, 2019), thus also adjustments to the educational policy environment and the prospects of lasting growth without threatening niche existence. Those “active in the school movement”, i.e., practitioners, should ask themselves “undogmatic” questions such as:

- What is the present mission and the purpose of the Steiner schools?
- Why are we trapped in the niche of a school for well-off, educated citizens?
- How can we tell if we are developing as a school in terms of content, not just administering?
- What is tired? Where is something new germinating?
- Who needs us?
- And above all, how do children get what they need for their future lives?

Dealing with such questions “can point the way and release forces”. The “profound working through of fundamental questions” perhaps triggers a dynamic in the design of the curricula of education, the selection processes for teachers, the curricula in the schools, and in dealing with self-administration. “Steiner schools still enjoy extensive independence from state influence. So new things could be introduced independently and quickly and lead to pedagogical excellence in all schools”.

What is needed are “proactive people” who “heartily advance reforms and do what needs to be done”. However, the demarcation problem remains, and the red line is also clearly stated.

The problems of classical, state pedagogy based on the usual, materialistic view of man seem to be increasing at the expense of today’s generations. This is another reason why there is a chance for parents to rediscover Rudolf Steiner’s schools.

But is self-advertisement the right way? The, as it is called,

“contemporary educational concept” of the Steiner schools “with its fundamental conception of man, their educational success, the congruence of supply and demand in terms of content, and their 100 years of experience actually predestined the Steiner schools for quantitative growth. There may be many reasons why this is not so in Switzerland.

Therefore, in the sense of a learning organisation, “further development” is called for. Four central approaches are mentioned:

- Didactics – what do today’s students need for their lives?
- Teachers – what does this mean for pedagogical training and further education?
- Interaction – how does educational partnership develop as a school culture?
- Self-governance – how to increase participation and efficiency?

The approaches and instruments are well known from state school development. The “systematic accompaniment of new teachers” is being considered. The coaching model and the continuing education of teachers are to be further promoted. Another focal point is “increased cooperation between schools”, which should also “involve parents more in school activities”. A “Swiss Parents’ Day” and a permanent parents’ forum are being considered. The framework curriculum for media education is “currently being introduced in the schools”. In addition, a “cross-level curriculum for business studies” and “ways to further develop the subject of relationship arts” are being sought. “The annual professional development days, each bringing together 400 teachers from Rudolf Steiner schools, are a proven model of internal networking”. State schools have no other problem areas for their school development. Continuing education, career entry phase, parent participation, cooperation between schools (“schools learning from schools”), strengthening media education, or weighting individual subjects have long been focal points of development work. It is just that state-run schools do not assume that they will be managed from one and only one pedagogical umbrella.

The aim is nevertheless a controlled approach to the state system, which both Herbart and Steiner rejected and fought against. Now, it should be about cooperation. The “splendid isolation” would thus be left behind to a certain extent. The idea is to cultivate external connections with local authorities, media representatives, educational scientists, and colleges of education. The *Association and the Foundation of the Steiner Schools*, for example, is looking into the question of whether a Waldorf course could be introduced at public colleges of education in order to raise the status of Waldorf education and expand the pool for recruiting teachers. The teacher training colleges in Switzerland are scientific colleges that cannot run special courses in which, for example, Steiner’s teaching of the four temperaments and their “karmic causes” are taught in a compulsory way. Also, the connection between the individual and the cosmos or the theory of incarnation cannot be dealt with at a scientific university, at least not without resolute opposition. On the other hand, without the assertion of a spiritual “conception of man” which clearly differs from the “materialistic” state pedagogy, i.e., without Rudolf Steiner’s thoughts on holistic education, the demarcation, which is necessary for one’s own identity as a movement, does not succeed. It needs a reason which must not be abandoned.

In Steiner’s (1919, p. 60) writing on the key points of the social question, the “prospect of economic success” is mentioned as the basic element of the present social order. This is to be understood as an incentive for the development of individual abilities and, thus, of education. To overcome capitalist society, however, a completely different “drive” is needed, requiring a “healthy spiritual life” from which a new social understanding would then flow (Steiner, 1919, p. 60).

Education, the school will, out of the power of free spiritual life, equip man with impulses that will lead him, by virtue of this inherent understanding, to realise that to which his individual capacities urge.

(Steiner, 1919, p. 60)

However, the “free cooperation of people in the spiritual field” is bound to Steiner’s anthroposophy and not to democratic freedom of opinion and assembly. The “unfree kind of spiritual life” (Steiner, 1919, pp. 60–61) can only be ended with anthroposophy, not with a variant of liberalism. Spirit, as well as soul, are to be understood cosmically and not individually. With regard to the social question, this is connected with a rejection of the Marxist (materialist) theory of class struggle. So far, “proletarian humanity” could not draw any “soul-forming power” from the free spiritual life. Capitalism causes in “the social organism a disease process” (Steiner, 1919, p. 64). The track for a cure is provided by free education while avoiding a “tyranny of the state” (Steiner, 1919, p. 78). Coupled with this was a clear prognosis: “One need not abolish state schools and state economic services overnight, but one will see growing out of perhaps small beginnings the possibility of a gradual dismantling of state education and economics” (Steiner, 1919, p. 81). One hundred years later, it is clear that this is precisely what did not and could not take place, while on the other hand, the right of children to education (Steiner, 1919, p. 88) was achieved with the enforcement of compulsory state education entirely without Steiner’s “free spiritual life”. But what is his pedagogy worth without social utopia?

The headlines of the advertisements for the Steiner schools in Switzerland are tailored to parents. They are told to choose a school system that works with “epoch classes, early foreign languages, and text reports”. The promise is: “Every child gets the time he or she needs to make progress”.²⁶

The big questions can then be well left aside, and a pragmatic way of development as opportunity utilisation offers itself. The prerequisite is that the competition is accepted. From autumn 2023, the Rudolf Steiner school in Aargau will offer a business secondary school with an IMS degree²⁷ (three years of school, one year of internship).²⁸

The state-recognised degrees guarantee access to certain courses of study at universities of applied sciences and increase the school’s attractiveness entirely without recourse to a utopia and tied to the standards of vocational education in Switzerland. The school organisation itself is adapted but not abandoned. Nominally, one can then still refer to Rudolf Steiner.

26 Rudolf Steiner Schulen (n.d.). *Rudolf Steiner Schulen* [Rudolf Steiner Schools] <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805095427/https://steinerschule.ch/schulen/> (memento from 2023, August 5).

27 *Ausbildungsgang “Integrative Mittelschule”* (Sekundarstufe II) [Training course “Integrative middle school”].

28 Schweizer Rundfunk (SRF) (2023, March 6). *Novum in der Schweiz. Steiner-Schule will neu Lehre und Wirtschaftsschule anbieten* [Novum in Switzerland: Steiner School to Offer New Apprenticeship and Business School]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230805095656/www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/novum-in-der-schweiz-steiner-schule-will-neu-lehre-und-wirtschaftsschule-anbieten> (memento from 2023, August 5).

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7 “The School, Where You Learn How to Dance Your Name.” An Analysis of the Public and Academic Debate About Waldorf Schools in Austria

Corinna Geppert

Who Wants to be a Millionaire?, the TV format that is shown in over 100 countries across the world, is known as “Millionenshow” in Austria. On 23rd November 2020, the 8th Austrian candidate was asked the following final one million euro question: What was the origin of the name Waldorf schools? a) a collection of fairy tales, b) a progressive educationist, c) a cigarette factory or d) a faith community?

If I knew anything about Waldorf schools at that time, it was that they were named after a tobacco company since Emil Molt, the owner of *Waldorf Astoria*, wanted Rudolf Steiner to establish a school for the children of his workers. So, I sat in front of the TV and wondered what I would do with one million euros. Fortunately, the candidate also knew the answer, so it was or now is his decision on how to spend the money. In this context, I found the choice of possible answers particularly interesting. Anyone who has ever dealt with the construction of single or multiple-choice questions knows that it is not easy to invent possible answers that are wrong and also appear to be plausible. This is, of course, particularly important for a question worth a million euros. Even the wrong answers must, therefore, trigger associations. The question that now arises in this article is: Why were these answers plausible, and what does this have to do with Waldorf schools in Austria?

The Current Situation of Waldorf Schools in Austria

According to the *Austrian Waldorf Association*, there are 38 Waldorf kindergartens and 20 Waldorf schools in Austria (as of 2021), the first of them founded in Vienna.¹ All of them are private schools with public rights (Austrian Waldorf Association, 2021).

The names of the schools associated with Waldorf education are interesting. Five schools mention Rudolf Steiner in the school’s name, and a further nine schools explicitly have Waldorf education in their name. These schools

1 Rudolf Steiner School Vienna-Mauer (1963). <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730084729/www.waldorf-mauer.at/> (retrieved 2021, April 14; memento from 2023, July 30).

can, therefore, be directly identified as schools that relate to the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. Seven schools, however, do not have Rudolf Steiner or Waldorf pedagogy in the name. The *Karl-Schubert School*, the *Paracelsus School*, the *Michaeli School* and the *Friedrich Eymann School*, for example, seem to relate primarily to ideas and concepts of persons other than Rudolf Steiner – at least as seen from the outside. The other three schools refer to the family, animals and farmland and the area in which they are situated, which shows a kind of distancing – at least in the school’s names.

There is, however, no systematic divide between federal states. It is impossible to conclude that the names have something to do with the area in which they are located. In all nine federal states of Austria, Rudolf Steiner schools, Waldorf schools and other schools can be found. In addition, there is no relation to when the schools were founded.

The *Private Schools Act 1962*, Section IV, declares the separation of denominational private schools and privately owned private schools. The denominational private schools have a legal right to have their personnel costs covered by the state. For the other private schools with public rights (this includes Waldorf schools), however, there is only the option of granting subsidies for personnel expenses, depending on the provisions of the applicable federal finance law. Reliable information on the amount of funding could not be found.

There is also no legal entitlement to subsidies for school material expenses and construction costs. For the Waldorf schools, the following applies: The funding of grants is solely at the discretion of the *Ministry of Education*, the municipalities and the federal states, despite general compulsory schooling being able to be completed at all Rudolf Steiner and independent Waldorf schools. Austrian Waldorf schools constitute the second largest private school initiative after Catholic schools (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2010).

One of the main centres for Waldorf teacher training is the *Centre for Culture and Pedagogy* (Zentrum für Kultur und Pädagogik, 2021a, 2021b). It is the non-profit sponsoring association of Waldorf education and was founded in 2001.² In cooperation with the *University for Continuing Education Krems*, it offers a Master’s degree in Waldorf pedagogy.³ The reason why the centre cooperates with the *University for Continuing Education Krems* is – according to their homepage – the fact that the Bologna process triggered the academisation and comparability of degrees. This shows that the Waldorf Association feels a need for academisation.

2 Zentrum für Kultur und Pädagogik (n.d.). Waldorfpädagogik studieren in Wien. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730085542/www.kulturundpaedagogik.at/home> (retrieved 2021, April 14; memento from 2023, July 30).

3 Zentrum für Pädagogik und Kultur (2023). WaldorflehrerIn werden. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730090032/www.waldorflehrerwerden.at/> (retrieved 2021, April 14; memento from 2023, July 30).

In addition, for students from the western part of the country, *Waldorf Salzburg*⁴ offers a basic course in Waldorf pedagogy. This basic course is intended to give employees of anthroposophical institutions a basis for understanding professional life and for parents and interested parties to gain a deeper insight into the approaches of Waldorf education.

The Austrian Academic Debate on Waldorf Education Between 2011 and 2021

The main purpose of this article is to describe how Waldorf education is discussed in academia and in public. I would like to start with how Waldorf education appears in the current academic debate in Austria and which topics are addressed. To answer this question, I conducted two case studies, more specifically, literature research studies.

Case Study 1 – Scanning Austrian Universities and University Colleges for Teacher Education

To find out more about the academic debate and how it is institutionalised, I systematically scanned the homepages and especially the research repositories (including publications, cooperation, events and projects) of all Austrian universities running an education department and all university colleges for teacher education for four keywords over the past ten years (2011–2021). I decided to use “Waldorf” and “Rudolf Steiner” as the basic keywords and two concepts that directly relate to Rudolf Steiner and are associated with Waldorf pedagogy: eurythmy and anthroposophy.

Zander (2019, p. 7) illustrates the reasons for using these keywords: “What is anthroposophy? Waldorf education, of course. In other words, children who can dance their names, put on plays and maintain a school garden.” Rudolf Steiner is regarded as the founder of anthroposophy, an epistemology and worldview that attempts to combine elements of German idealism, Goethe’s worldview, Gnosis, Christian mysticism, Far Eastern teachings and the scientific knowledge of Steiner’s time. A central aspect was and is an application of the idea of evolution to spiritual development (Lippert, 2001; Ullrich, 2011, 2015; Zander, 2019).

Eurythmy is in turn a field of application of anthroposophy and was developed by Steiner from 1912 onwards (Basfeld, 2013; Zander, 2019). It is an obligatory school subject in Waldorf schools.

As a dance form of expression of language or music, eurythmy aims to connect people in a sensual and aesthetic way with the forms and events

4 Waldorf Salzburg (n.d.). Seminar für Anthroposophische Erziehungskunst. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730090247/www.waldorf-salzburg-seminar.at/> (retrieved 2021, April 14; memento from 2023, July 30).

of the spiritual world. Through movements of the dance experience, the actors should rise from the sensual to the supernatural,

says Ullrich (2011, p. 63) in a book on Rudolf Steiner’s life. Eurythmy, therefore, should make it possible to express words such as names in movements.

Table 7.1 shows the institutions where the keywords revealed results and the kind of result.

Table 7.1 Results of scanned repositories.

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Keyword(s)</i>	<i>Results</i>
<i>Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt</i>	Waldorf	<p>1 Publication: Mertlitsch C., Mertlitsch C.: <i>Schreiben mit allen Sinnen. Schreibunterricht an einer Waldorfschule</i> [Writing With All Senses. Writing Lessons at a Waldorf School]. In: <i>ide. Informationen zur Deutschdidaktik. Zeitschrift für den Deutschunterricht in Wissenschaft und Schule</i> 2007 [ide. Information on German Didactics. Magazine for German Lessons in Science and School 2007], pp. 104–111.</p> <p>1 Cooperation: The <i>Waldorf School Klagenfurt</i> is a partner institute of the <i>Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt</i> (AAU).</p> <p>1 Project: Project title: <i>Kreatives Schreiben im Rahmen der Kooperation zwischen AAU und Schulen</i> [Creative Writing as Part of the Cooperation between AAU and schools] Project description: This project was about using creative writing to build a bridge between writing in schools and at the university, but also between research and practice. The students of the Waldorf school (cooperation school) were able to get to know the university as a writing room as part of the project. In addition, research-led writing workshops should be developed with the teachers. Project run time: 17.10.2017–15.11.2018</p> <p>1 Poster Presentation: Gregor Chudoba (15.11.2018); TLT – Theater and Literary Translation, a poster presentation on the ongoing cooperation project with the <i>Klagenfurt Waldorf School</i>.</p> <p>Event: Interim assessment of school-university cooperation work, <i>Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt</i>.</p>

(Continued)

Table 7.1 (Continued)

Institution	Keyword(s)	Results
University of Vienna	Waldorf	<p>1 Publication: Kneucker, R. (2018). <i>Der Bezirk der Bildung. Interesse Initiative Intuition: Zum Lehrerbild der Waldorfpädagogik. Festschrift für Tobias Richter</i> [The District of Education. Interest Initiative Intuition: On the Teacher Image of Waldorf Education. Festschrift for Tobias Richter]. In L. Weiss & C. Willmann (Eds.), <i>Interesse Initiative Intuition: Zum Lehrerbild der Waldorfpädagogik</i> [Interest Initiative Intuition: On the Teacher Image of Waldorf Education]. In <i>Waldorfpädagogik: Positionen_Praxis_Perspektiven</i> [Waldorf Education: Positions_Practice_Perspectives], 3, pp. 95–103. LIT Verlag.</p>
University of Vienna	Anthroposophy	<p>1 Publication: Biewer, G. (2007). <i>Anthroposophie.</i> [Anthroposophie.] In G. Theunissen (Ed.), <i>Handlexikon geistige Behinderung: Schlüsselbegriffe aus der Heil- und Sonderpädagogik, sozialen Arbeit, Medizin, Psychologie, Soziologie und Sozialpolitik</i> [Handbook Mental Retardation: Key Terms from Special Education, Social Work, Medicine, Psychology, Sociology and Social Policy], (pp. 27–28). Kohlhammer.</p>
Paris Lodron University Salzburg	Waldorf	<p>1 Publication: Haider, G., Schreiner, C., & Wallner-Paschon, C. (2006). <i>Kompetenzen und individuelle Merkmale der Waldorfschüler/innen. Die PISA-Studie. Österreichs Schulsystem im internationalen Wettbewerb</i> [Competencies and Individual Characteristics of Waldorf Students. The PISA Study. Austria's School System in International Competition]. Böhlau Verlag.</p> <p>1 Publication: Buck, P., Rehm, M., Schön, L., & Theilmann, F. (2010). <i>Wie gelangt eine Lehrperson zu ihren Lehrinhalten? Inhaltsauswahlkriterien im deutschen Physik- und Chemieunterricht im Vergleich.</i> [How Does a Teacher Arrive at her Teaching Content? Content Selection Criteria in German Physics and Chemistry Lessons in Comparison] In H. Paschen (Ed.), <i>Erziehungswissenschaftliche Zugänge zur Waldorfpädagogik</i> [Educational Approaches to Waldorf Education], (pp. 327–336). VS-Verlag.</p>

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Keyword(s)</i>	<i>Results</i>
<i>University College for Teacher Education Vienna</i>	Rudolf Steiner	1 Newsletter: <i>Beitrag zu 150 Jahre Rudolf Steiner</i> [Contribution to 150 years of Rudolf Steiner] (30th October 2019): <i>Am Anfang die Idee! Fachwissenschaftstagung 2011. Experimentierwerkstatt 150 Jahre Rudolf Steiner</i> [In the Beginning the Idea! 2011 Conference: Experimental Workshop 150 Years of Rudolf Steiner] <i>Freinet für die Berufsschule</i> .
<i>University College for Teacher Education Lower Austria</i>	Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy	1 Publication: Erwin Rauscher (Ed.) (2009), <i>Schulkultur. SCHULdemokratie, Gewaltprävention, VerhaltensKULTUR. Pädagogik für Niederösterreich</i> [School Culture. SCHOOL Democracy, Violence Prevention, Behavioural CULTURE. Pedagogy for Lower Austria], Vol. 3. Baden: Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich.
<i>University College for Teacher Education Vienna Lower Austria</i>	Waldorf	1 Publication: Rauscher, E. (Ed.) (2012), <i>Lernen und Raum: gebaute Pädagogik und pädagogische Baustellen. Pädagogik für Niederösterreich</i> [Learning and Space: Built Pedagogy and Pedagogical Building Sites. Pedagogy for Lower Austria], Vol. 5. Baden: Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich.
<i>Johannes Kepler University Linz</i>	Waldorf	1 Cooperation: The <i>Waldorf School Klagenfurt</i> is a partner institute of the <i>Johannes Kepler University Linz</i> .
<i>University College for Teacher Education Carinthia</i>	Waldorf	1 Cooperation: The <i>Waldorf School Klagenfurt</i> is a praxis school of the <i>University College for Teacher Education Kärnten</i> .
<i>University College for Teacher Education of Christian Churches Vienna/Krems</i>	Waldorf	1 Lecture: One lecture on reform pedagogy in the curriculum.

The homepages of all 17 other institutions did not reveal any result in terms of publications or in terms of ongoing or past projects or cooperation.

At university colleges for teacher education, Waldorf education can be thematised within the framework of theories of alternative school and learning concepts, as well as methodological approaches of alternative school and learning concepts, but it is not necessarily an integral part of the training of teachers.

As far as universities are concerned, it turns out that especially universities collaborating with Waldorf schools conduct research with and about Waldorf institutions. Beyond these collaborations, hardly any results could be found, especially not in the research repositories.

Case Study 2 – Publications on Waldorf Education Between 2011 and 2021

The second case study deals specifically with publications associated with Waldorf education. I did research at *Fachportal Pädagogik*,⁵ the *Austrian National Library*,⁶ the university online libraries and all scientific journals that deal with education issues and are based in Austria. A few related publications could be found; however, there is only one systematic series of publications that collects research on Waldorf education in Austria and discusses related issues.

The Austrian publishing house, LIT, has a series entitled *Waldorf Education: Positionen Praxis Perspektiven* [positions_practice_perspectives], edited by Leonard Weiss and Carlo Willmann, who work at the *Centre for Culture and Education*, an affiliated institute of *Alanus University*, and who are in leading positions at the *University for Continuing Education Krems* for the training of Waldorf teachers, as shown in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2 Volumes of the series *Waldorf Education: Positions Praxis Perspektiven*.

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the volume</i>	<i>Content</i>
Weiss and Willmann (2016)	<i>Foundations, Methods and Form of the Waldorf School. Current Work from the Research Colloquium Wiener Dialogue</i>	In this first volume, various considerations of the basics of the educational theory and the methodological orientation of Waldorf education are presented.
Weiss and Willmann (2018a)	<i>Learning in a Meaningful Way. Design Open-Ended. On the Understanding of Performance in Waldorf Education</i>	Based on fundamental educational theory considerations, essential dimensions and aspects of a Waldorf pedagogical understanding of performance are presented in this volume, as well as, among other things, the forms of alternative performance assessment developed and pursued at Waldorf schools.

5 Fachportal Pädagogik (n.d.). *Home*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730091628/www.fachportal-paedagogik.de/> (retrieved 2021, April 14; memento from 2023, July 30).

6 Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (n.d.). *Home*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730091924/https://search.onb.ac.at/primo-explore/search?vid=ONB> (retrieved 2021, April 14; memento from 2023, July 30).

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the volume</i>	<i>Content</i>
Weiss and Willmann (2018b)	<i>Interest Initiative Intuition. On the Image of the Teacher in Waldorf Education. Festschrift for Tobias Richter</i>	This special volume is about Tobias Richter, who was involved in Waldorf teacher training for around 40 years and has had a decisive influence on the development of Waldorf education in Austria, Germany, Croatia and Slovenia.
Weiss (2020)	<i>Individuality and Recognition – Educational-Philosophical Perspectives of Waldorf Education. A Foundation</i>	Weiss reconstructs the concepts and practices of Waldorf education from the perspective of a philosophical “theory of recognition.”
Weiss and Willmann (2021)	<i>Being and Becoming. Contributions to the Understanding of Development in Waldorf Education</i>	The authors of this volume investigate various aspects and motives of the Waldorf educational understanding of development, as well as references and differences to other approaches. The challenges and perspectives of development-oriented pedagogy become visible.
Krobath et al. (2021)	<i>Formation of Meaning Through Encounters with the World. Challenges and Tasks of a Waldorf Education in the 21st Century</i>	In this volume, pedagogues and educational scientists pursue current educational challenges and sketch a picture of current and future fields of activity in Waldorf education.

The literature research revealed a considerable number of publications in the German-speaking area in Germany or Switzerland. However, there were hardly any academic publications about Waldorf education in the Austrian context – apart from the series published by the Austrian publishing house *LIT Verlag*. The reasons for this are questionable. One explanation might be that studies on Waldorf education in Austria were not published by local publishers but internationally and were therefore not found in my narrow literature research. Another explanation might be that there is little research on Waldorf education in Austria. This, again, might have different reasons, such as a lack of interest on both ends – at the end of the researchers and the Waldorf schools. Waldorf schools in Austria make up a significant proportion of the school landscape but might not be very open to external evaluations or research since they have their own quality measurements.

Quality assurance measures such as the *Wege zur Qualität* (WzQ) [Paths to Quality] procedure testify to the fact that Waldorf schools are increasingly

under pressure to provide objective quality measures yet are hardly ever considered for university-related independent research. WzQ was created based on anthroposophy and was originally developed for institutions in the field of educational, curative education, social therapeutic or medical-therapeutic professions. It was recognised by the *Ministry of Science* in 2005 as a quality assurance procedure for schools. The WzQ procedure leads to regular observation and processing of the most important factors influencing the performance and development capability of an organisation. This shows that Waldorf schools feel the same pressure as in the mainstream system, namely, to establish quality assurance measurements but use specific measures that would not be used for the evaluation of quality in other private or public schools.

How Waldorf Education Is Discussed in Public

I also conducted two case studies on how Waldorf education plays a role in public debate. The first one deals with *21 Questions on Waldorf Education*, and the second one deals with press releases and forum postings.

Case Study 3 – 21 Questions on Waldorf Education

The first hint of public debate is given through a list of *21 Questions on Waldorf Education*, published by the *Austrian Waldorf Association*.⁷ These frequently asked questions reveal issues that Waldorf schools are confronted with. They create a certain picture of Waldorf schools in society and what is present in society in terms of content and prejudices towards Waldorf education. They are, therefore, also suitable for showing an image of Waldorf schools in society.

It is interesting that the questions reveal organisational points on the one hand, but also questions that can be defined as prejudices. To give readers an overview, I clustered the questions in Table 7.3:

Table 7.3 “21 Questions to Waldorf Education” clustered.

The basics	3 Who was Rudolf Steiner, and what does he have to do with Waldorf pedagogy?
School organisation	2 How do Waldorf schools differ from other schools? 6 Is it true that Waldorf schools always have very large classes? 10 Which degree can be obtained at a Waldorf school? 11 Is the Waldorf school expensive? 21 What if my family moves?

⁷ Austrian Waldorf Association (n.d.). 21 Fragen an uns. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230801183808/www.waldorf.at/organisation/21-fragen> (memento from 2023, August 1).

Students at Waldorf schools	1 Which children are accepted at a Waldorf school? 4 Does a child have to be artistically inclined to be suitable for the Waldorf school? 5 Isn't it that mainly children with learning difficulties go to a Waldorf school?
Organisation of teaching and learning and inner organisation	7 Is it true that there are no grades and no grade retention at Waldorf schools? 8 Without grades and without grade retention, are the children even motivated to learn? 12 The Waldorf schools are called “free schools.” Does that mean that children there are raised in an anti-authoritarian way? 13 Why do the children have one and the same class teacher in the first eight years of school, if possible? 14 What is the meaning of “epoch lessons”? 15 Can a teacher even be qualified in all subjects? 19 What is the deal with eurythmy? 18 Are students at Waldorf schools taught ideologically? 20 Do the natural sciences play any role at the Waldorf school? And what is the position of Waldorf schools regarding computer use?
Questions about future perspectives after school life	9 Isn't Waldorf pedagogy something like the presentation of a healed world? Will students even be able to deal with “hard reality” later on? 16 How are adolescents in upper secondary education prepared for work life? 17 Won't preparation for final degrees be restricted if there are so many internships, theatre productions and craftwork?

I would like to discuss the wording of some of the questions that may cause some ambiguity and what they may (implicitly) mean.

5 | Isn't it that mainly children with learning difficulties go to a Waldorf school? This question suggests that Waldorf schools are often confronted with the accusation that they are a school for those who cannot cope with the regular school system. The way the question is put shows that failure to cope seems not to be attributed to the fact that regular schools cannot offer the children what they need but that the pupils are unable to cope with the requirements of the system because they are intellectually incapable of doing so. This question suggests that it is, therefore, not assumed that those children who want something better than the regular school system predominantly attend Waldorf schools but that Waldorf schools are for children who cannot cope with the requirements of the mainstream system.

8 | Without grades and without grade retention, are the children even motivated to learn? The idea here is that grades and the fear of grade retention are good extrinsic motivators that are needed for progress in learning. Without them, which is the idea behind the question, there is also a lack of motivation

to learn, and schools will not fulfil their task to qualify children. Another dimension of the question can be seen in the fact that the lack of extrinsic motivation can also lead to the children not being well prepared for tests and not preparing themselves well. In connection with this, one can also mention the fear that parents have to be the ones who have to motivate the child to perform, thus leaving the burden of building up motivation to them. Waldorf schools are thus confronted with the accusation that they do not give their students any external incentive to learn and thus neglect learning itself.

18 | Are students at Waldorf schools taught ideologically? This question can, of course, be read in two ways. From the point of view of parents who want their children to be taught ideological things, this would be a kind of reassurance that the school is ready to do what they want. On the other hand, this can also be interpreted as an anxiously asked question. Behind this question, there may be a fear that children will be confronted with ideas not approved by their parents. The Waldorf school is thus confronted with the charge of being ideological and of passing this ideology on to the children. Again, school websites emphasise that they do not convey a worldview.

20 | Do the natural sciences play any role at the Waldorf school? And what is the position of Waldorf schools regarding computer use? The phrasing of this question is particularly interesting because it implies that parents or interested parties assume that Waldorf schools are particularly artistic and possibly linguistic but neglect the natural sciences, physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology and geography. The addendum regarding the position of the Waldorf schools in relation to computers is also irritating. On the one hand, this question may be whether children are also being taught computer science and are learning the basics of dealing with new technologies. But it can also be a general question as to whether Waldorf schools have a negative attitude towards technology and mechanisation and want to prevent children from dealing with modern technologies. This can also be illustrated by the official Waldorf curriculum for all schools in the *Austrian Waldorf Association* (2010). Here, a section is included mentioning the negative effects of computers and computer games on the mental development of young children. The fascination with artificial pictures, as it is written, replaces their own fantasy. Waldorf schools are thus confronted with questions that challenge their open-minded approach to scientific laws and the unstoppable technological advancement of society.

9 | Isn't Waldorf pedagogy something like the presentation of a healed world? Will the students even be able to deal with "hard reality" later on? This question evidently addresses the fear that children in Waldorf schools are presented with a kind of nicely coloured reality that ultimately does not prepare them for everyday life, for the "real" world. This is, of course, also based on the assumption that children are cared for particularly well in Waldorf schools, which should be in the interests of legal guardians. At the same time, the fear is expressed that this is alien to life and that the children must grow into a society in which they are subjected to tests – nowadays more and more standardised tests – and that they ultimately must pass in order to maintain

their place in society and to assert themselves in it. The Waldorf school is thus accused of being alien to life and keeping children too far away from the real world, which is a threat, especially for educationally active parents.

17 | **Won't the preparation for final degrees be restricted if there are so many internships, theatre productions and craftwork?** This question relates to the fact that final qualifications are required to apply for apprenticeships and jobs. The performance, cognitive abilities and knowledge of the children are addressed here, and the assumption becomes evident that Waldorf schools are viewed as an educational establishment in which the main focus is on artistic expression and practical action and less on building knowledge. As a result, the children could be good at artistic and technical matters but would have acquired too little knowledge to succeed in other tests, which means that they would only have limited opportunities in the labour market.

On the one hand, these 21 questions help to clarify in advance topics that are repeatedly challenged in connection with Waldorf education and can thus be seen as an attempt to dispel prejudices. At the same time, this also gives an insight into the topics brought up in Waldorf education dealing with the core elements of the movement.

It remains unclear how the 21 questions were selected. It is reasonable to assume that these are the questions that are often asked of Waldorf schools and thus reflect public perception. However, it could also be that these questions were deliberately chosen by the Waldorf community and that topics were deliberately addressed that were well reflected in the community and can be provided with clear answers. These questions would thus also be a kind of self-attribution and positioning.

What the questions show is that Waldorf education must struggle with prejudices but has also integrated some of these areas into its education in such a way as to identify with them.

Case Study 4 – Public Debate in Newspaper Forums

To grasp the public debate about Waldorf schools, online archives of newspapers were systematically scanned for the term “*Waldorf Schulen*” [Waldorf schools], “Rudolf Steiner”, “eurythmy” and “anthroposophy” in the main Austrian newspapers *Kurier*, *derStandard*, *die Presse*. *DerStandard.at* offers the possibility to comment on content and is open to readers without a subscription. Here, I assume that the comments represent public debate to a certain extent, being aware that there is a bias for persons who are critical about the topics addressed in the article. Some research also suggests that in anonymous forums, people behave in a less civil and polite way (Dillon et al., 2015; Rosenberry, 2011; Santana, 2014, 2016). Nevertheless, these posts may give us some insight into the topics discussed in relation to Waldorf education.

The period from January 2011 to June 2021 is included in the analysis. Only comments directly related to Waldorf education were chosen. Some of the articles mention Waldorf schools but are related to other topics such as

digitalisation etc. There are also comments not directly related to Waldorf education, which have been excluded from the analysis.

The newspaper articles come from the *derstandard.at* website. Fourteen articles were included in the analysis, whereby usable statements were found in only nine forums. The forums are moderated so that offensive statements are deleted.

The total number of existing postings for each article is given in Table 7.4. However, these postings were already selected in advance through moderators.

Inclusion categories were as follows:

- There had to be a direct reference to Waldorf schools. If there was only a general discussion about private schools, the postings were not included in the analysis.
- The statements had to have clear content. Statements that merely agreed or disagreed with a contribution by others were also not included in the analysis.

Table 7.4 Articles, the total number of available postings and postings used for analysis.

<i>Article</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Total number of postings</i>	<i>Number of postings included in the analysis</i>
<i>Stuiber</i> (2018, February 1)	This article reproduces an interview with the Viennese school director Josef Reichmayer, who has had good experiences with alternative performance appraisals for a long time. Reichmayer mentions that graduates of Waldorf schools survive in life without having been graded and criticises the grading system as a pure control instrument.	603	19
<i>Riss</i> (2018, February 1)	This article refers to school choice after fourth-grade elementary school. In Austria, after four years of common primary school, children have to choose between a more academic path and a career-oriented path. Of course, you also have the option of attending a private Montessori, Waldorf or denominational school.	1,288	/
<i>Nimmervoll</i> (2018, September 2)	This article reproduces an interview with the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Research, Heinz Faßmann (2017–2021). They talk about digitalisation in schools and the necessity of it.	515	/

<i>Article</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Total number of postings</i>	<i>Number of postings included in the analysis</i>
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2017, July 3)	The article deals with the topic that free schools such as Montessori, Waldorf and other alternative schools aim to gain equal status to confessional schools, which would mean equal subventions from the state.	0	/
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2016, August 2)	This article is directly focused on free schools with public rights and emphasises the situation of Waldorf schools and the financial aspect of it. Eva Becker, Board member of the Waldorf Association, complains that the Waldorf schools are chronically underfinanced.	155	49
<i>Nimmervoll.</i> (2014, April 1)	This is an interview with Francesco Avvisati, the main author of the “problem solving” Pisa study, who explains that so-called statutory schools, e.g., Montessori or Waldorf schools, perform significantly better in Austria when it comes to “problem solving” than public schools.	457	/
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2014, June 12)	This article is again on financial aspects. The so-called non-denominational independent schools, i.e., above all Waldorf and Montessori schools, are, in contrast to denominational private schools, whose teaching costs are fully borne by the federal government, financed primarily through parental contributions and subsidies.	9	1
<i>Aigner</i> (2014, June 13)	This article is on financial aspects and includes quotes from an interview with Edgar Hernegger, parent spokesman for the Waldorf schools in Austria. It is said that tuition fees increase at independent schools. Independent schools are not reimbursed for teacher costs.	404	60
<i>Aigner</i> (2011, June 5)	In a report, the author describes how she experienced a Waldorf trial workshop.	264	162
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2011, February 22)	This article, written for Rudolf Steiner’s 150th anniversary, objectively describes Rudolf Steiner’s course of values, career path, the first school foundations, his ideas and the connection to natural cosmetics and medicine.	95	77
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2011, April 6)	This article is on the financial aspect of private schools and especially the reimbursement of personnel costs per year.	33	/

(Continued)

Table 7.4 (Continued)

Article	Content	Total number of postings	Number of postings included in the analysis
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2011, May 13)	The warnings from a parents' initiative that the existence of private and privately owned schools is threatened by new rules on the recruitment of teachers and a de facto cut in funding have apparently had an effect. According to new criteria, which schools are eligible for funding, the locations not only have to have public rights and be members of an umbrella organisation.	20	/
Egyed (2011, March 15)	The article brings together interviews with parents, the education expert Stefan Hopmann and a student and talks about the advantages and disadvantages of Waldorf schools in a controversial manner. Prominent graduates in Austria are listed.	405	167
<i>Austrian Press Agency</i> (2011, February 25)	The non-denominational private schools see their existence in jeopardy and are now making people mobile on the internet with a citizens' initiative. According to representatives of the private schools, the federal government will de facto cut the subsidies of 1,000 euros per student for 2011 by 20%.	135	13
Total		4,383	562

337 of 562 postings used were grouped, resulting in 11 topics that emerged from the data – topics were coded inductively using the *Discourse Network Analyzer* (Leifeld et al., 2019).

Authority (13 statements): Contributions were grouped in this category that described or claimed that authority plays an important role in Waldorf schools, which would manifest itself in “tight schedules”, “strict leadership” or “prohibitions.” An example was: “Authoritarian structures, demotivated and poorly qualified teachers, educational stone-age methods, bullying, etc.” (statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011). But there are also dissenting voices who describe that much more value is placed on discipline during school hours and respectful interaction with one another than in public schools.

Distancing from Steiner's views (38 statements): This category contains statements in which people, even if they personally have (good) experiences

with Waldorf education, distance themselves from the central ideas of Rudolf Steiner and state that these do not play a central role in Waldorf schools. A forum statement attached to the article by Egyed (2011) came from a Waldorf student who shared his/her experiences and distanced himself/herself from Steiner by saying that he/she was not interested in his methods and that he/she had not had the experiences in his/her school that students have to deal with Steiners ideas. The topic of eurythmy was addressed and what was mostly associated with it was being able to express one’s own name through dance. Ultimately, he/she questioned clichés about the Waldorf school:

I’m not at all interested in Steiner’s teaching, and the same goes for the-ology and esotericism. Nor was I forced to deal with all this or believe in it when I went to school. I can’t remember dancing my name or that I danced my name (or am I repressing it?).

Another interesting statement follows the report of *Aigner* (2011): “My children, all together, were in a Waldorf school or kindergarten for a total of 30 years; I still consider the choice to be a good one, Rudolf Steiner mostly a weirdo and myself an anti-eso.” This statement is interesting in that it shows a complete distancing from Rudolf Steiner’s ideas – the author apparently has years of experience with children in Waldorf institutions, although he/she considers Rudolf Steiner to be a “weirdo” and him-/herself cannot relate to the idea of esotericism. The author would like to express that nowadays, Austrian Waldorf schools have few things in common with the schools founded by Rudolf Steiner. The author wants to clarify that the parents of Waldorf students are not (all) esoteric and do not necessarily agree with Rudolf Steiner’s ideas.

Experiences of current or former Waldorf school students (42 statements): Here, statements that describe individual experiences with Waldorf education are grouped. These experiences are usually generalised for the whole organisation. The following is a statement from a former Waldorf student who is quite critical of his school days. He/she writes that not everything was relevant from his/her point of view, but at least no obstacles were put in his/her way. Interestingly, he/she does not write explicitly that the type of school would have helped him/her on his path. He/she describes success in computer science training, which he/she completed well:

Although there were certainly things that I then and still see as unnecessary, the Steiner school did not put any obstacles in my way. I didn’t pass my training as a computer scientist with distinction, but I did it very well.

(statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011)

“And the former Waldorf students at the evening school are all good at thinking. Who can say that about themselves? This is far more important than memorising facts” (statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011). Here,

the experience with alumni at an evening school is presented and positively emphasised that they are very good at creating connections. This is contrasted with memorisation or rote learning. Memorisation is a method that seems to be relevant in this person's view in mainstream schools but not in Waldorf schools.

In Steiner schools (of course, I don't know whether this is the case in all of them, in one it is the case), the children are only allowed to play with acoustic instruments because electric guitars are rejected as devilish . . . something like that would be enough for me to make a wide berth of it.
(statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011)

In this post, it is explicitly stated that the statement is only based on the observation of a school, a school in which technology is not appreciated and electric guitars are viewed as "devilish." However, if the person says that such a circumstance would prevent them from attending a Waldorf school, this one experience would be extended equally to all other schools.

Eurythmy (21 statements): These statements explicitly focused on the question of whether eurythmy as a school subject was useful, whether students enjoy it or whether it is esoteric. "It shouldn't matter if you are waltzing or dancing your name" and "Yeah anyway, why annoy the kids with math when they have a lot more fun dancing their names" (statements in the forum attached to Aigner, 2014) are two very similar statements that represent the category of eurythmy. It is interesting that eurythmy is mostly associated with dancing one's name.

Problems in Society – Vaccination (18 statements): This is a very specific category, where statements are grouped that focus on the role of Waldorf schools in relation to specific societal problems. An example is that persons discussed whether Waldorf schools are also responsible for the emergence of more cases of measles:

61 percent of Waldorf students and 1 percent of the other students had measles. It is not frightening that a small group is not or hardly vaccinated against a dangerous disease, but rather the idea of what would happen if everyone else behaved the same way.
(statement in the forum attached to Aigner, 2011)

In this statement, the Waldorf schools are given a bad report as far as the health of their students is concerned. In this subject area, it is also discussed that those parents who are sceptical about vaccinations feel drawn to Waldorf schools.

Teacher education and teacher action (23 statements): Statements relating to the training of Waldorf teachers and a few areas of the work of teachers were grouped together in this subject area. "To speak of the Steiner indoctrination as 'training' I consider to be daring" (statement in the forum attached

to Austrian Press Agency, 2011, February 22). The very polemical assumption here is that training as a Waldorf teacher does not result in any qualification for the profession. The author probably refers to the fact that there are lateral entrants, especially in Waldorf schools, and that formal university studies are not a prerequisite for practising the profession. According to the author, this also means that high-quality teaching cannot be guaranteed, which in the end must lead to the children having a lack of knowledge. This person imagines that didactic principles do not predominate in teacher training but that prospective teachers come into contact with Rudolf Steiner’s ideological principles. This per se would probably not be regarded as problematic if one assumes that this would have no effect on the children.

Finally, a statement that refers to the fact that the work of Waldorf teachers is not limited to school:

Only in dictatorships do self-appointed inspectors make house calls. It’s sad if parents put up with something like that. Teachers are neither police officers nor youth welfare officers. If they notice that children are having problems at home, then they should notify the authorities and not act on their own initiative. Even if Waldorf teachers like to act as deputies.

(statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011)

This person refers to the fact that one of the tasks of Waldorf teachers with respect to families is to ensure that the children also find an environment at home that corresponds to the principles of Waldorf education. For the author, this represents an inappropriate and unreasonable invasion of privacy. He/she feels that teachers have no right to do this.

Montessori vs. Steiner (17 statements): In this topic, statements that discussed differences between Montessori education and Waldorf education were included. Here, it is important to note that in Austria, Montessori kindergartens and schools are quite common. There are 44 institutions that are also recognised by the *Montessori Association*, and six of them have a seal of quality. In addition, there are 58 institutions that, according to their own information, work according to Montessori, Montessori-oriented or other educational reform approaches. Here, however, the *Montessori Association* does not know their quality and does not check them. This is interesting in that most of these institutions have “Montessori” in their names.⁸ Interestingly, in most cases, persons perceive Montessori education as better than Steiner education. “It bothers me that Montessori and Waldorf are constantly mentioned in the same breath. This only ensures that

8 Österreichische Montessori Gesellschaft (n.d.). Die ÖMG – Der bundesweite Dachverband für Montessori-Pädagogik. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730092800/www.montessori-gesellschaft.at/> (memento from 2023, July 30).

the comprehensible and serious Montessori pedagogy is subjected to the same general suspicion” (statement in the forum attached to APA, April 2011). This statement clearly shows that the author sees a serious difference between Montessori pedagogy and Waldorf pedagogy. While Montessori pedagogy is presented as scientifically sound and serious, the suffix “general suspicion” shows that this author has obviously strong doubts about Waldorf pedagogy. The second statement again expresses that schools differ from one another in essence, according to the author, but have positive characteristics that make them better than regular schools. “Montessori and Steiner are very different. What connects them is the humanistic aspiration, which is lacking in the concept of the state school, but which is compensated for by many idealistic teachers (unfortunately only by some)” (statement in the forum attached to APA, 2016).

Pseudoscience and esoteric (47 statements): In this area, statements are summarised that explicitly connect the words pseudoscience and/or esotericism with Waldorf education and/or Rudolf Steiner. An example: “Steiner was a failed academic who declared himself an omniscient cosmic clairvoyant and only uttered grotesque nonsense. To call this alternative science once again takes the cake” (statement in the forum attached to APA, 2011). The choice of words clarifies that the person strongly rejects Rudolf Steiner’s teaching methods. It becomes clear that Rudolf Steiner is seen as a person who had no scientific competence.

Another person stated:

As with all schools, there are positive and negative things to report. What bothers me personally about Waldorf schools is that their substructure, i.e., the basis on which they are built, is scientifically unsustainable rubbish (which is also noticeable in the high priority given to religious education) – I find that in principle, dangerous and harmful . . . Just my opinion.

(statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011)

This person first acknowledges that it does not only depend on the type of school, whether there are problems or not. However, the person describes the basics of Waldorf education as “scientifically unsustainable rubbish” and justifies this with the priority that religion has in the school system. He/she declares this not only as problematic but also dangerous. Here again, one of the prejudices against the Waldorf school becomes evident, namely that it represents a kind of religion, which is shown in a separate topic.

Sect (60 statements): In this section, statements that explicitly mention Waldorf schools in relation to the word sect are clustered.

Steiner’s teaching is proclaimed as an inevitable religion, and everyone has to submit. A form of brainwashing, where teachers come to parents and children at home and take a close look at the apartment and then

explain in a Guru-like manner what has to be changed, otherwise the ‘community harmony’ is disturbed.

(statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011)

Several aspects are combined in this post. The words “religion”, “brainwashing” and “guru” are clearly associated with a language that refers to sects. At the same time, it is criticised that teachers in Waldorf schools have far more power outside of their classroom than is the case in public schools. The fact that teachers come to the children’s families at home and thus examine, criticise and control the children’s private environment is perceived as negative and as an encroachment on personal rights of freedom. From the author’s point of view, this practice is justified by the fact that teachers want to create equality and do not tolerate any deviations.

“Waldorf schools are not sect schools. Anthroposophy is not taught in them” (statement in the forum attached to APA, 2016). This statement is also interesting because the person is obviously taking a position opposite the statement that Waldorf schools have something to do with sects. The justification follows, however, from the statement that anthroposophy is not taught in Waldorf schools. Accordingly, a closeness between anthroposophy and the image of Waldorf schools as sect schools is suggested here.

Racism or anti-Semitism (20 statements): This cluster contains 20 statements that explicitly link racism or anti-Semitism with Rudolf Steiner or Waldorf pedagogy. “I had children in a Waldorf school and never, but really never did I note any racial hatred or any kind of discrimination” (statement in the forum attached to APA, 2011). Here, again, a singular experience with a school is transferred to the whole school type and to everybody involved. What the author probably claims is that he/she never experienced systematic racism and/or anti-Semitism, which is also supported by the following statement:

You have no idea about Waldorf schools. Otherwise, you would know that anti-Semitism does not occur in Waldorf schools (at least in none that I know of). Of the teachers in Waldorf schools, I would say 1/4 to 1/3 are close to anthroposophy. The rest are idealists or people who want a job despite the low pay and work a lot for it.

(statement in the forum attached to Aigner, 2014).

These statements are based on current experiences with Waldorf schools. Quite the contrary, referring to Rudolf Steiner’s theory, another person wrote:

Steiner was a staunch supporter of the Root Race theory and an anti-Semite, and it wasn’t about being a “sign of the time.” Do you think one should see the ideology of the NSDAP as being of its time? It has quite a few parallels to the Waldorf ideology, which shouldn’t be surprising

since the Anthroposophical Society was not of insignificant interest to the NSDAP and its ideologues.

(statement in the forum attached to Aigner, 2011)

In this statement, the person directly attacked Rudolf Steiner's theory, at least some parts of it, and assumed that this is still valid for today's practice. He even refers to the NSDAP practices as a radical example of an ideology that cannot be "seen in its own time" to legitimise it. He/she even goes so far as to construct a link between Rudolf Steiner's theories and the NSDAP ideology.

Waldorf education as the best way (34 statements): Many of the statements reported so far have a negative connotation. Positive statements get lost in the debate. When they appear, they are usually a contradiction of very harsh statements about Waldorf education: "Waldorf school instead of elementary school and then off to the academic secondary school. This is the best path for a child!" (statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011). This person suggests a mixture of Waldorf education and public schooling in order to ensure the best possible upbringing of a child. It is interesting here that the elementary school, in particular, is considered to be the institution that was positively assessed as a Waldorf institution, but the higher grades should be achieved in a regular school. Academic pressure, which Waldorf schools possibly cannot accommodate from the author's point of view, plays a role here.

Another person explicitly refers to achievements:

After 12 years of Waldorf school, my cousin graduated from a public school with honours, so I guess we can't be called stupid and seen just as jumping around in the woods dancing and singing our names! That's completely crazy!!

(statement in the forum attached to Egyed, 2011)

The person challenges several clichés about Waldorf schools, the performance component, eurythmy and that Waldorf education mainly consists of no content being conveyed but only senseless experiences made. Another person shows that, in their opinion, education is better developed in Waldorf schools than in public schools:

Today's Waldorf schools are more pedagogical in the sense of educational science than public academic secondary schools; it is precisely from there that many flee from selfish teaching to human pedagogy in the sense of one's personal growth.

(statement in the forum attached to APA, 2016)

The public debate about Waldorf schools, as shown in news forums, is relatively negative. Of course, it must be assumed that people who have a very strong opinion on a topic and who may also be emotionally involved in the

topic express their opinion, and those who might argue objectively do not even comment. Nevertheless, the debate does reflect part of the story as it refers to topics that are associated with the public in connection with Waldorf schools and Rudolf Steiner, namely eurhythm, racism and ideology.

Discussion of the Results

The public debate in Austria shows that it is shaped by a few central issues. The structure of Waldorf education with epochal instruction is hardly questioned and also hardly addressed. The debate revolves particularly around the foundation of the Waldorf movement, which is established and discussed on the basis of the writings of Rudolf Steiner and, in particular, his anthroposophy.

At this point, I would like to recall the starting point of this article, namely the question that made an Austrian one million euros richer: “Who or what gave the Waldorf schools their name? a) a collection of fairy tales, b) a progressive educationist, c) a cigarette factory or d) a faith community?” Whoever created this question did a good job because basically any of the answers would have been possible and reflect what is commonly discussed in the Austrian public debate on Waldorf education. The option a) answer is reminiscent of the association with forest pedagogy and the relationship between play and dance. The option b) answer relates directly to Rudolf Steiner, who seems to be well known to many people and who is also directly associated with Waldorf schools. The option d) answer shows very clearly to be in association with the forum poster with terms such as sect, pseudoscience and esotericism. Zander (2019) describes the last point very well when he writes:

Anthroposophy would have been long forgotten today if its fields of practice did not exist. Sure, Steiner’s work would continue to serve as a quarry for esoteric thinking, he would be revered in alternative religious milieus, and small anthroposophical lodges would cultivate his heritage and pay homage to their master, but without practice, we wouldn’t be discussing Steiner and anthroposophy in daily newspapers and blogs. In practice, however, some anthroposophists also see this career as a defeat because Steiner’s ideas are often used pragmatically, disregarding their ‘intellectual’ centre, loosely based on the motto: Everyone wants Weleda,⁹ nobody wants our esotericism.

(Zander, 2019, p. 187)

This statement also reflects distancing from the foundations, saying that Waldorf schools are not ideological, and anthroposophy is only a part of the foundations of the school but not important anymore. Public opinion

9 *Weleda* is a brand of organic or “natural” cosmetics.

is quite strong and deals with prejudices. This shows that the debate is very emotionally coloured and that the ideological background of the Waldorf schools triggers strong reactions, especially among the sceptics. Interestingly, the proponents, on the other hand, argue that they only emphasise the organisational and structural aspects. Being different from the mainstream is also emphasised. And more importantly, it is repeatedly emphasised that ideology is not taught in Waldorf schools. For Waldorf advocates, anthroposophy is a kind of background that does not find its way into everyday school life. This is interesting insofar as eurythmy is understood as a form of application of anthroposophy, and eurythmy is a compulsory school subject. But here, too, the proponents argue that the importance is not very high.

It is also interesting that some ideologies are better received in the public debate than others. Montessori schools are rated as significantly better than Waldorf schools. The Austrian scientific debate has little to counter this, as research and related publications are few and far between. The academic debate on Waldorf education in Austria during the past ten years (2011–2021) is hardly visible. Mainly, universities that collaborate with Waldorf institutions as partner institutions have intensive contact, but this, nevertheless, does not mean that this is represented intensively in publications. The only systematic debate that can be identified is the one that is directly linked to Waldorf teacher education, the publication series *Positionen_Praxis_Perspektiven* [positions_praxis_perspectives], edited by Leonard Weiss and Carlo Willmann. They continually collect papers on special topics and, therefore, contribute to the debate. There is hardly any evaluative research, apart from the results of the pisa surveys, which certify that Waldorf students have good knowledge. Nevertheless, those publications and those researchers who deal intensively with them in Austria are rare. Therefore, in the end, the impression remains that Waldorf schools and what is taught in them can be discussed in a very controversial way, but they are more than schools where you learn how to dance your name.

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8 Waldorf Education in Finland

Soft Alternative, Adaptation, and a Life in Suspicion

Jan-Erik Mansikka

Introduction

In the wake of the 21st century, Finland has become a nation known for its educational system. The reputation stems from the recurring PISA assessments that began in 2001, where Finland, in relation to other participating countries, has produced surprisingly good educational results. Today, the Finnish educational system is often conceived as an interesting case of national educational development (see Sahlberg, 2021), which in turn has resulted in a permanent stream of international delegations to Finnish schools and universities (Reinikka et al., 2018). The reasons for the strong performance are multidimensional and culturally dependent. The Finnish educational system is often associated with resistance to standardisation, an emphasis on broad-based knowledge where learning outcomes are not published, and a culture of trust through professionalism (see Kupiainen et al., 2009; Dovemark et al., 2018).

Finnish schools have a tradition of being state-regulated, with little space allotted for market forces to affect education (Säntti et al., 2018). Within this tradition, a strong, almost unanimous, consensus about the direction of national education has developed (see Simola, 2015). What, then, is the role of alternative educational movements in such a national context? The setting seemingly differs from, say, that of Hungary, where an increasing number of Waldorf schools have been founded following “increasing political attacks on state education since 2010” (Turós, 2022, p. 96). The case of Finland is the opposite, considering the stability of state education.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between Waldorf education and public education in the Finnish context. The main question is as follows: How is Waldorf education integrated into the public educational system in Finland? I approach the question from two slightly different perspectives. One perspective discusses the educational space and alternative provided by a Waldorf education within the general educational culture of Finland. The other perspective addresses how Waldorf schools have had to adapt their teaching models to meet the standards of the national educational system.

Little public discussion, academic research, or other empirical source material have previously focused on the topic. Therefore, I have conducted interviews with six persons who are actively involved in education but are also familiar with Waldorf education. The intention is to provide a coherent narrative of the role and reputation of Waldorf education in the Finnish context. The presented narrative is exploratory in nature, hence quite limited in scope and incomplete. It is, to a high degree, dependent on the views of my informants. It will, however, shed some light on Waldorf education in a particular national setting, which might be interesting to compare with other contexts.

Waldorf education is clearly an underdeveloped area of academic research, even on a global scale, not least because of its strong degree of independence and alternative framework. Considering its long history, the question of how it has been integrated into a national educational framework is, therefore, quite interesting. The perspective of this study is to approach Waldorf education as an alternative educational movement that, over time, has been organised and adapted in relation to a national framework. Waldorf education is a rather broad concept, with educational institutions ranging from early childhood education and special education to adult education. The emphasis of this study is to discuss it on the level of basic education as an alternative to the public comprehensive school in Finland.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I briefly outline the development of Waldorf schools in Finland to situate them within the national context. Then, I examine existing literature and public discourses on Waldorf education in Finland from the last few decades. The two sections provide the background for the more empirical part of the paper. The empirical section begins with some methodological considerations before dealing with the main findings from the interviews conducted for the present study. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

Waldorf as an Independent School Within the Finnish Context

According to the *Finnish Basic Education Act* (Law 628/1998, §4), the local authority (municipality) is obliged to arrange basic education in comprehensive schools for all children between seven and 16 years of age. There are, however, exceptions: “[t]he government may authorise a registered association or a foundation to provide education”, and in that case,

[a]n authorisation may be granted to provide education by the medium of a foreign language, special-needs education, education according to a particular ideology or education for students other than children of compulsory school age on the grounds of regional or national educational and cultural needs.

(Law 628/1998, §7.1)

Therefore, the educational system in Finland allows for two different kinds of schools. Most schools are common legislation public schools, maintained by municipalities and funded by the government. A relatively small number of state-subsidised private or independent schools also exist, to which Waldorf schools belong.

The basic guidelines for private or independent schools are stipulated in the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), which distinguishes between two types of education for an alternative education provider, either education based on a particular philosophical system or education based on a particular pedagogical system (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 158). The legislation, however, emphasises that alternative education “shall be provided in accordance with this *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*, without asking the pupils to commit to a certain philosophy, values or a pedagogical system on which the education may be based” (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 158). At the same time, the local curriculum based on an alternative education model “may be idiosyncratic within the limits specified in the authorisation to provide education and in the Government decree” (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 159).¹ The law allows for an interesting combination of freedom and restraint. The Finnish educational system allows for idiosyncratic educational movements, but they must adapt themselves to the national curriculum and be designed in a way that maintains the goals of a democratically open-ended education, i.e., they must not seek to indoctrinate pupils into a certain worldview.

In 2021, nearly 70 private or independent schools in Finland offered basic education for students between seven and 16 years of age.² The pupils

- 1 The education provider for alternative education must describe the following aspects of what the local curriculum is based on (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 159):
 - (a) Based on a particular philosophical system
 - What are the perspectives of a particular philosophical system based on, and how do they complement the underlying values, objectives, and key contents of a basic education?
 - How do these perspectives manifest themselves in the school culture and working approaches?
 - How does the education emphasise the values, knowledge, skills, and capabilities based on this philosophy, and how are they implemented in a cross-cutting manner in the instruction of various subjects and learning modules?
 - (b) Based on a particular pedagogical system
 - What are the pedagogical principles and solutions of the particular pedagogical system based on, and how do they complement the pedagogical policies of basic education as specified in this core curriculum?
 - How are these principles and solutions reflected in the school culture and working approaches and in the instruction of various subjects and learning modules?
- 2 It is rather difficult to provide an exact number because of the different types of schools. Finland has an association for independent schools consisting of 56 member schools. Its objective is “to promote the cooperation between school managements and teacher colleagues in

enrolled in private schools accounted for only a little more than 2% of all students receiving a basic education in Finland.³ Twenty-three of the private schools were Waldorf schools. Other private schools included, for instance, old private general education schools (that remained private after the large reform of the 1970s) and Christian schools.⁴ Waldorf schools are clearly the most numerous among schools based on alternative pedagogical movements. On a national level, Finland has only one Montessori school, one Freinet school, and one Reggio Emilia school. However, several Montessori classes are integrated within public schools, and at least one public school practises Freinet pedagogy. Reggio Emilia is mostly connected to early childhood education, not basic education.

The first Waldorf school in Finland opened in Helsinki in 1955.⁵ The date was rather late from a Nordic perspective, with a Waldorf school being founded in Oslo in 1926 and in Stockholm in 1931 (Göbel, 2020). Due to the increasing number of studies on progressive education in the Nordic countries in the first half of the 20th century, the pedagogical ideal of a more child-centred education also spread to Finland. The Waldorf school in Helsinki, as a pedagogical alternative to the state schools, also appeared at a time when Finland had started to plan a massive reform in education, in line with the unified educational system then being implemented in Sweden, namely a free nine-year comprehensive school for all pupils. A new Act was finally passed in by the Finnish government in 1968, after a long and winding process (Ahonen, 2012). Despite a strong tendency to standardise all schools providing basic education, Waldorf schools survived and were well-received in their first decades in Finland. In some cases, educational authorities saw them as having a vitalising role in terms of school development, supporting some of the pedagogical values behind the planned educational reforms, most notably the emphasis on individualisation (see Paalasmaa, 2011a; Pärssinen, 2014).

It is also noteworthy that when the process of arranging a uniform, comprehensive school structure was about to be completed in Finland in 1977, a law regarding Waldorf schools was instituted (Law 417/1977). It secured the

Finnish independent schools” (see <https://web.archive.org/web/20230801123745/www.yksityiskoulut.fi/in-english/>, memento from 2023, August 1). Not all Waldorf schools are members of that association.

3 In 2021, there were 552,990 pupils in basic education, 14,826 of whom were enrolled in private schools. The private schools are generally smaller schools with an average of 138 pupils, compared to an average of 258 pupils in all schools (Vipunen Education Statistics Finland, 2022).

4 In recent decades, the number of private schools has grown somewhat due to the founding of new Christian schools. In 2021, the pupils enrolled in Steiner schools are about 24% of all pupils enrolled in private schools. The pupils enrolled in Steiner schools number 3,642 and are about 0.6% of all pupils enrolled in basic education in Finland (Pale, 2023; Vipunen Education Statistics Finland, 2022).

5 An association was established in 1953 to help organise the school project. This association is today *Steinerkasvatuksen liitto ry* [Federation for Steiner Waldorf Education].

future of the three existing Waldorf schools as part of the educational system with partial state funding.⁶ The law, however, limited the number of schools to three. Several new Waldorf schools founded in the 1980s existed legally as private instruction groups before a new law (Law 169/1991) made it possible for them to receive official status, with state funding and the possibility to rely on their own local curriculum (Paalasmaa, 2011a, pp. 20–25; Pärssinen, 2014, pp. 25–32).⁷ Today, the government provides a high level of funding to Waldorf schools: 94% of the corresponding costs for state schools.⁸ The institutionalisation of Waldorf teacher training programmes began with the founding of an educational institute, *Snellman University College*, in 1980. It currently has four teaching training programmes.⁹ A more systematic collaboration with teacher education programmes at the university level is difficult to develop, partly because Waldorf teacher education belongs to an administrative, educational sector (liberal adult education), which does not provide formal teacher qualifications equivalent to university studies.

Discourses on Waldorf Education

When it comes to Waldorf education, a certain tension exists between theory and practice. Its theoretical groundwork or basis stems from the anthroposophical lectures on education given by Rudolf Steiner in the years 1919–1925. This period marks the phase in Rudolf Steiner’s thinking when he, in the wake of World War 1, developed a theory on the need to strike a balance between the political, economic, and cultural spheres. Such a three-fold social theory was, in his opinion, most beneficial for educating young pupils. This background, with its spiritual ontology, often makes Waldorf education somewhat controversial and stands out in the educational realm (Dahlin, 2017, p. 3). Steiner’s spiritual ontology, however, is not an isolated system but must be understood within the framework of Western esoteric movements of the early 20th century. As Aspren (2014) has claimed, esoteric discourse in this modern context “occupies a curious place in between

6 According to the law in 1977, the funding provided to Waldorf schools was 60% of what the state provided to state schools (Law 417/1977, §5).

7 To establish a new private school, two criteria were mentioned in the law from 1991. (1) the teaching in the school should rely on an internationally well-known educational system, and (2) the operational culture of the school is beneficial for developing educational activities in the country (Law 169/1991, §77a).

8 Interestingly, the negotiations on the new Government Program in 2023 resulted in a commitment of increasing the state funding of private schools to 100%, which will also include Waldorf schools. The party of Christian Democrats in Finland was included in the government formation talk, and this is probably their demand of securing the future of Christian schools (see Finnish Government, 2023, June 16).

9 The four programmes are as follows: (1) Waldorf class teacher (300 ECT), (2) Waldorf art teacher (300 ECT), (3) Waldorf eurythmy teacher (240 ECT), and (4) Waldorf kindergarten and pre-primary teacher (240 ECT) (Snellman University College, 2023).

disciplines: it typically overlaps with religion, science, and philosophy alike” (Asprem, 2014, p. 419), and it can be seen “as responses to the problem of disenchantment that leans on scientific naturalism” (Asprem, 2014, p. 439).

The anthroposophical aspect of Steiner’s theory might create a certain isolation when it comes to the theoretical framework of Waldorf education. It is difficult to integrate with the general discourses within the educational sciences. At the same time, the holistic view on human development underpinning Waldorf education, including spiritual development, makes it a salient alternative in the educational field. It is quite hard to imagine an approach to Waldorf education that would be wholly committed to a strict materialistic worldview. On the other hand, many of the practical, pedagogical activities in contemporary Waldorf schools, such as the emphasis on stories and tales or play, arts, and practical learning, are much less contested because they have much in common with the philosophically influential educational tradition stemming from Rousseau, via the Romantics, to Dewey’s theory on progressive and contemporary critical education (Dahlin, 2017; Mansikka, 2007). Consequently, Waldorf education is generally more respected for its practical pedagogy than theoretical background.

Waldorf education can thus be approached from different perspectives. In Finland, most texts on Waldorf education are from within the Waldorf community itself. This is a natural consequence of being an alternative educational community but also the result of only a limited connection between Waldorf education and academia. Jarno Paalasmaa (2011b, 2016, 2019), a Waldorf teacher and active in the Waldorf community, has written the most popular books on Waldorf education in Finland. His books have the potential to reach a broader audience because they contextualise Waldorf education in relation to progressive education and different historical, educational ideas as well as challenges in contemporary society. The most influential person in the history of Waldorf education in Finland is, without question, Reijo Wilenius (1930–2019), who was active in the public sphere and worked as a bridge-builder between the Waldorf community and academia.¹⁰ He wrote on a broad range of subjects, mainly within the fields of philosophy and education, and many of the works relate to Waldorf education or Rudolf Steiner’s thinking in some way.¹¹ In Finland, surprisingly few studies or pub-

10 Reijo Wilenius was a professor of philosophy at the *University of Helsinki* (1965–1972) and later the *University of Jyväskylä* (1973–1992). Moreover, he was chair of the *Anthroposophical Society* in Finland (1966–1996). He was already practising when the first school was founded in Helsinki, where he worked as a teacher for some years. He is also the founder of Waldorf teacher education institution in Finland, *Snellman University College*, which is named after the famous Finnish Hegelian philosopher and statesman J.W. Snellman (1801–1886).

11 Wilenius’ most popular book on education (1976) is in the realm of educational philosophy. One of his teachers was the internationally famous Finnish philosopher G.H. von Wright (1916–2003). In an interview, Wilenius spoke about their relationship and his own

lic media discussions in recent decades have focused on Waldorf education from a critical standpoint. One such example, though, is an article by Uljens (2006) on the concept of *Bildung*, which criticises Waldorf education for being an example of anti-individualistic education:

The risk is that independent schools with a particular educational philosophy (for example, Waldorf education) are anti-individualistic and not at all adapted to the individual pupil. They are anti-individualistic because they do not maintain the necessary free space as a guarantee of the independent formation of free will in the young person. Independent schools tend to function in a normatively socialised way, and they often become an extension of the existing values in homes or in a particular ethnic or religious group. The risk of indoctrination is obvious.

(Uljens, 2006, p. 15, originally in Swedish, translated by the author)

This quote reveals an interpretation of Waldorf schools as institutions with a particular worldview, indoctrinating young pupils through education. The same kind of question is the focus of a doctoral thesis completed at roughly the same time, namely a study on how the local curriculum in one Waldorf school in Finland reflects ideas from Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical thinking (Ehnqvist, 2006). Her results reveal an esoteric content in the curriculum, but one that is largely hidden. Furthermore, both studies correlate rather closely with a Finnish television documentary from 2009 (YLE, 2009), investigating if and how the anthroposophical ideas of Rudolf Steiner are reflected in the teaching practices of Waldorf schools.¹² Critical voices, though, have not been publicly active since.

In the last few decades, several other theses have been published on Waldorf education in Finland. Mansikka (2007) conducted a study on the early philosophy of Rudolf Steiner in relation to the basic assumptions guiding Waldorf education models. The three most recent works are all by active Waldorf teachers. Niinivirta (2017) has studied the concept of *phronesis*¹³ in relation to Waldorf education. He utilises the concept as a framework to

engagement with anthroposophy: "Professor Georg Henrik von Wright, the supervisor of my work . . . was very understanding of the fact that the topic of my dissertation was coming from my studies of Steiner's thinking. He was very tolerant, and there was a good mutual understanding between us. I was already often known in public as an anthroposophist; I came early on to Waldorf schools as a teacher and then as the 35-year-old chair of the Anthroposophical Society, where I remained for 30 years. But none of my professor colleagues ever criticised me for this" (Mansikka, 2010, originally in Finnish, translated by JEM).

12 Relying on interviews, the documentary concluded that most Waldorf parents were satisfied with the school but rather sceptical of anthroposophy. Moreover, the children did not receive any information about Steiner or his contested anthroposophical ideas (YLE, 2009).

13 *Phronesis* refers to a virtue much discussed in ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle defined the concept as being relevant to practical and particular situations. It should therefore be distinguished from so called intellectual virtues, such as *episteme* or *sophia*.

study aspects of Waldorf teacher education and narratives from seven alumni about their paths to teaching in Waldorf schools in Finland. Raunela (2018) conducted an autoethnographic action study based on her work as a Finnish language and literature teacher in a Waldorf high school in Finland. Finally, Honkonen (2021), a Waldorf music teacher, studied the interface of music education in Finnish basic education and Waldorf education. All three studies indicate that more research has been done on Waldorf education in recent years, mostly by academically oriented Waldorf teachers.

The Empirical Framework: Interviews

As we have seen, the amount of public and academic discussion about Waldorf education in Finland has been quite modest. To provide the empirical grounding for this case study, it thus became necessary to conduct interviews with persons who could talk about their experiences with and ideas about Waldorf education from a Finnish perspective. The number of interviewees is not extraordinarily big, yet this is also not necessary due to the exploratory design of the study. Even if enlarging the number of respondents would have added more perspectives, the interviews conducted here were very informative, and a certain saturation with respect to the theme was experienced.

The final framework for the empirical part of the study consisted of interviews with six persons. I approached my potential respondents by expressing a desire to discuss the reputation and reception of Waldorf education in a Finnish context. This thematic focus fell well within the parameters of the main question: To what extent is a Waldorf education integrated with the Finnish educational system? Three criteria were important in selecting the informants. First, it was important to find informants with (at least some kind of) relationship or connection with Waldorf education. It would have been pointless to conduct interviews where the informants only had a superficial knowledge of Waldorf education. Second, it was important that informants had diverse roles and positions in society despite working in the field of education. I sought a multiplicity of voices and, therefore, more than likely, different perspectives on Waldorf education. Third, it was important that the participants represented views from both inside and outside the Waldorf educational community.

All six informants were teachers from various educational institutions. Three of the informants were qualified Waldorf teachers also engaged in either Waldorf teacher training or the national *Federation for Steiner Waldorf Education*. The other three informants have a background as qualified teachers in public schools but were now working in academic institutions or positions closely aligned with academia. Two of them represented public, research-based teacher education programs at the university level, with experience in educational research. One of the two was also a Waldorf parent and spoke primarily from that perspective. The third non-Waldorf teacher had a position at the *National Board of Education* and was familiar with Waldorf

Table 8.1 Informants participating in the study.

<i>Informant</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Position/Role</i>
A	Waldorf	Waldorf Teacher Education
B	Waldorf	Waldorf Teacher Education
C	Waldorf	Federation for Steiner Waldorf Education
D	Public	University, Teacher Education, Research
E	Public	University, Teacher Education, Waldorf Parent
F	Public	National Board of Education

education, especially from that perspective. Thus, a certain symmetry existed between the Waldorf and non-Waldorf teachers. For the analysis, I gave every respondent a code (A–F), visualised in Table 8.1.

The semi-structured interviews made it possible to cover similar themes with all respondents. The semi-structured approach also provided them with opportunities to discuss the themes in a personal and informal manner. The interviews lasted between 60 and 95 minutes. Two of the informants (A and B) participated in the interview together as a small focus group. All participants received information about the aim of the interviews and gave their consent to the use of material for that purpose. The empirical data collection process followed the guidelines set by the *National Board on Research Integrity* (TENK, 2022).

My analysis follows a thematic approach. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and discussing themes or patterns in the qualitative material and proves useful for the search for common thematic elements that structure the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary interest in this case was the content of speech, focusing on the meaning of language but in relation to the narratives that my informants provided (Riessman, 2003, p. 3). The analysis is not a simple description of the material but a way to process the data by focusing attention on repetitions, categories, similarities and differences, or things left out (Bryman, 2012). The construction of themes and categories for this analysis was followed by the intention to present a coherent narrative, where different perspectives emerge and work together to offer a more balanced understanding of the subject.

Findings

Three closely related narrative threads structure this section. They stood out in my analysis of the interviews, that is, in my search for similarities and differences between the informants. The first has to do with what Waldorf schools represent from an educational standpoint, here designated as a “pedagogical alternative with soft values”. The second thread is about integration, which requires “adaptation on different levels” into the Finnish educational system. The third and final thread involves the constant threat posed by Waldorf’s

anthroposophical background, which provokes “suspicion in the surrounding community”. Together, they help construct a picture of Waldorf education in Finland, about its role and reputation in the national context.

Pedagogical Alternatives With Soft Values

A central theme discussed by all informants was how they conceived Waldorf education in relation to contemporary educational culture in Finland. On a general level, Waldorf schools represent an established alternative to mainstream education. One of the (non-Waldorf) informants delved into philosophical reflections on the existence of educational alternatives. According to the informant, the issue of alternative educational movements raises several important questions. It is

fundamentally a political question, and now we come to the core question of private schools . . . who has the power in education? How far does it stretch? And when we have a system that is part of the democratic society, how much variation can there be? How far can the variation go, and who can decide about the variation?

(D)

Such questions are relevant in a country like Finland, which has a strong unified basic education system with a tradition of rather little pedagogical variation as well as rather small differences between school performances. However, this informant held that, in principle,

in education, there should not be monopolies . . . it is important to have a possibility for alternatives . . . this is how we have done it in Finland, for example, in the 1970s, when there was an ambition to get rid of these [private schools], but the state, governed by law, won. So, in the end, there was the right to keep them, but there was always a line coming up also in the opposite direction: How much can you decentralise, and what is the state’s responsibility for these schools?

(D)

While an alternative educational model does not constitute a value in and of itself, it does offer something different, experienced by some as valuable and enriching. What, then, does the Waldorf model offer to the educational field? One theme that emerged in the interviews was that the Waldorf pedagogy often represents “soft methods” in education and a holistic view of learning. However, Waldorf teachers often feel that “the discussion [on Waldorf education] takes on a certain kind of one-sidedness”, which might become a bit superficial (A). Another way of making the same point came from another informant, who had a clear view of the essential benefit of a Waldorf education:

I see Waldorf education not as a pedagogy of methods in the sense that we would have these certain methods that make it a pedagogy of

Waldorf education, for example, painting wet on wet, beeswax chinks, or morning rhythms. There are also other schools that have something similar. Therefore, at least for me, the core of Waldorf education is the view of a human being.

(C)

It is somewhat unclear what the “view of a human being” means in this case, but from a Waldorf perspective, it seems essential as an educational alternative. Is the anthroposophical view of a human being, as in Rudolf Steiner’s lectures, a presupposition for understanding the core of Waldorf education? Interestingly, the informant who primarily had experience with Waldorf as a parent expressed a similar view, but in terms of Waldorf schools maintaining a proper educational attitude toward children, much in line with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989):

There are different methods, but I would say that Waldorf schools approach children in a holistic way and support the development of a child in diversified ways. That is the biggest difference between public school and Waldorf school . . . and it depends a bit on the [Waldorf] teacher and what methods they use. But what I wish, as a parent in Waldorf schools, is that the teacher is thinking, has the Waldorf educational way of thinking, to see the child as a valuable person, and a willingness to support the development of the child.

(E)

The discussions also revealed that the general conception of Waldorf education as an alternative model seems to have changed in the last few decades. According to one of the Waldorf teachers, many parents today say they choose the school “because it is an alternative . . . but less because it specifically provides a Waldorf education . . . many are just looking for a softer alternative, where children can remain a bit longer as children” (C). It is usually the first six classes that are most respected in Waldorf education. After that, demands coming from the surrounding society begin to appear and have an influence. Informant C continued by saying:

I think that the soft values that somehow are conceived to belong to a Waldorf education at present times guide these choices, but on the other hand, it is interesting that you do not apply anymore to Waldorf schools; I mean, there is not much rush [to get into] these schools. . . . What is this then about? Even if the parents are looking for softer values, the [number of] pupils is decreasing in Waldorf schools.

(C)

Is it the case that there is currently less demand for a softer type of pedagogical alternative in Finland today? Or is the decrease in popularity related to the development of the comprehensive school in a direction where the

Waldorf alternative becomes less attractive? None of the informants chose to explore these themes in any depth, but a salient feature raised especially by the Waldorf teachers was the need to develop their own educational profile. A recurring theme was that Waldorf institutions must be able to look past recent setbacks and pinpoint their specific educational role to survive in the future. One of the Waldorf teachers mentioned visiting a neighbouring comprehensive school and comparing it with Waldorf schools:

I must say that I admired their innovations in that school, and in a brave way, they had developed the educational work, and I sometimes have the feeling that we [in the Waldorf community] need that kind of discussion without prejudices. . . . Yes, we must deepen our own educational work so that we can develop.

(A)

None of the informants went into detail about what kind of development is needed. The discussions, for the most part, left the issue open, and the informants mainly mentioned it in relation to the demands of contemporary society and their relation to education. As an example of this, one informant saw a real need for a transformation and that Waldorf education has much more to offer than it currently does, namely in a situation

where we have a social, climate, economic, and energy crisis – all at the same time. What value can Waldorf education offer in such a global situation? . . . So, we are clearly at a turning point; the pedagogy is 100 years old, but we cannot go into these crises with our old ways of doing things.

(B)

The Waldorf education movement celebrated 100 years of existence in 2019, which brought forth new initiatives and self-reflection about the future of this educational model in Finland. One informant expressed an interesting perspective on development, with reference to a certain liberation from the original pedagogical model:

I sometimes have the feeling that this is the first time in the history of Finnish Waldorf schools that we are really thinking about this education in a new way, to be applicable in the Finnish context. Because when it arrived in Finland, it came as very German, everything was done as in Germany without thinking about how it fits into our [society].

(C)

We have seen that, according to the interviewees, Waldorf schools in Finland represent an established alternative to state schools, offering a softer and holistic pedagogical alternative, both regarding the view on human beings

and teaching methods. However, the alternative offered by Waldorf schools does not automatically attract pupils to the schools, and the schools must develop and adapt to the needs of contemporary society. The long history and well-elaborated educational framework can also hinder development if not combined with a self-reflective and future-oriented attitude. We will now turn to how the Waldorf educational model has been adapted to fit the Finnish educational system.

Adaptation on Different Levels

As we have seen, alternative education movements complement the Finnish comprehensive school within the boundaries set in the major educational policy documents. All informants reported viewing Waldorf education as well integrated within the Finnish educational system. In the words of one:

Well, I see that Waldorf education is a part of our educational system. This means that we have been approved and desired as an alternative to the educational system, considering that we receive 94% [of our] economic support from the state. We have our own curriculum. Of course, we are following the national core curriculum, and it constrains us, but I do see that we have a very stable and safe footing in the Finnish educational system.

(C)

Waldorf education, as an alternative education provider, always faces a certain tension between how far its own educational alternative can be stretched and how much it must adapt its way of teaching to fit the national guidelines. The process of adapting to a national core curriculum seems to be a Janus-faced one; it enables reflection and development but also puts restraints on the pedagogy:

I do not know that well the other alternative pedagogies . . . but we [as Waldorf schools] have freedoms in many things, as in the curriculum. On the other hand, the national core curriculum constrains us quite a bit, and we teachers have not always learned to use the freedom that we have, and we have been holding on tight to the [national core] curriculum and been a bit afraid to use the freedoms we have.

(C)

The *National Board of Education* is responsible for ensuring that all schools in Finland work within the prescribed educational guidelines. From their point of view, one important form of communication with Waldorf schools concerns adapting their local curriculum and pedagogy to the frameworks established in the national guidelines. Some aspects of the curriculum have

been more difficult to adapt to than others. According to the informant from the *National Board of Education*,

there is one thing that has proven to be a difficult thing for Waldorf schools to approve, namely that you put an iPad in the hand of children in the first grade or during early childhood education, and [have them] do something with it. Within this theme, we have been compelled to give small reprimands to them, even if that is not our task; our duty is to give advice and instruction.

(F)

Despite some forms of resistance by Waldorf schools, the Waldorf movement overall has a good relationship with the *National Board of Education*. From the Waldorf perspective, there has been “good cooperation with the National Board of Education, and [we] are in constant discussions with them” (C), while the *National Board of Education* representative noted that “the Waldorf federation has intentionally established a kind of connection . . . and is strongly networking with [us] . . . so that information flows all the time” (F). The open communication and trust between the two are a sign of mutual respect, which helps Waldorf schools conform better to pedagogical models at the national level.

Perhaps the most significant expression of how well Waldorf schools have integrated within the Finnish educational system is that teachers from Waldorf schools today often participate in working groups for national educational curriculum work. In that way, Waldorf perspectives have become a part of broader educational development work. The informant from the *National Board of Education* noted that,

when the National Core Curriculum for basic education was devised in 2014 . . . there are elements in the values and operational culture that have influences from Waldorf . . . in that way [through collective participation] the door was opened for them in [terms of] curriculum work.

(F)

This proved an important step for integrating Waldorf education more permanently into the national framework. In this case, the adaptation process moved in both directions. Being part of the process of drafting national curriculum guidelines has increased Waldorf’s credibility as an independent education provider and enabled it to contribute to the development of national education guidelines in general. This means that Waldorf education, in the Finnish context, is valued for the educational thinking it brings to the national educational framework. Referring to a recent process, the informant from the *National Board of Education* mentioned that s/he definitely

wanted a Waldorf teacher for our [national] curriculum work because they have this, sort of, functionality, and as I said, a respect for the

child, where children, but I don't know if I am interpreting it right, do not have to do things they are not yet ready for.

(F)

The adaptation by Waldorf schools and their increasing collaboration with the surrounding community has also required a focus on communication. How do Waldorf schools represent themselves to others? What type of educational language have Waldorf schools chosen to adopt when describing their pedagogy? According to the Waldorf teachers, they really must think about the best ways to communicate their values and viewpoints. Since other people might have quite different ideas about Waldorf schools, it is therefore important to have a clear message about the purpose of such schools:

[the teaching method] is perhaps the concept by which we discuss and communicate with mainstream education. I think it is okay, and there is no falsehood in it. We need to think about how we speak, what concepts we use, and whether they are understandable. I really think this is a more difficult problem for us internally than the discussion outwards. . . . In the Federation for Steiner Waldorf Education in Finland, we have been working quite a lot on how we communicate, and somehow, we have perhaps been successful when the communication has turned out to be smooth.

(C)

The effort has not always resonated at all levels. The Waldorf education model has not been integrated to any significant degree at academic institutions. Courses on Waldorf education are not part of the curriculum in any of the eight universities with teacher education programmes in Finland. On the other hand, teachers can include perspectives on Waldorf education in other existing teacher programme courses. However, according to one of the informants (D) working in teacher education, this is not very common. Alternative educational movements are almost invisible in academic teacher education programmes. To my knowledge, no larger research projects focusing on Waldorf education or even including the Waldorf perspective are currently being conducted or in the planning stages in Finland. Academic teacher training has not been a strong point of interest for Waldorf schools but according to one of the Waldorf teachers, there are signs of slow change that might bridge the gap in the future:

It seems to me that the academic research-based perspective in the realm of Waldorf education is becoming more acceptable. But maybe you don't see it yet in the field of practice. . . . It is approved of, like, "yeah, yeah". On the other hand, the traditionalists have become a minority, those who draw only from the past, as "this is how we have always done it". . . . This kind of emphasis clearly exists, that there is

less tradition, and that academic research is getting more acceptance. It has been a slow process, but this is my experience.

(A)

We witness an emerging adaptation process, with Waldorf educators increasingly engaging with academic discourses on education, which appears as a logical consequence of the overall adaption process of Waldorf education within the Finnish educational system. The same informant mentioned that such a process might require an attitude of modesty as well as self-critical awareness when it comes to one's own pedagogical practices. An attitude of modesty and pragmatic communication help increase people's receptivity to alternative education models in relation to the surrounding educational community.

We don't try to appear as radically different but to carry out Waldorf education as we understand it. Research-based activity is something that strengthens us in that we are all the time on the same level [with academia] . . . we must work in a direction where we can be understandable and that we ourselves understand what we are doing, and it is transparent . . . so we need to have a quite pragmatic approach to these usually so idealistic goings-on.

(A)

We have seen that Waldorf education has become more integrated with the Finnish educational system via a process of adaptation on many levels. Alternative education has a given place in the national framework, and Waldorf schools have worked consistently to adapt their pedagogy to align with the national educational policy documents. The Waldorf movement has re-focused on how it communicates with the surrounding community, especially with its strategic partners, such as the *National Board of Education*. Furthermore, not taking a radical position or an antagonistic role towards mainstream education has resulted in only little hostile assaults directed at Waldorf education.

An Educational Life in Suspicion

The sensitive question that Waldorf schools face continuously, and probably worldwide, is about the role of Rudolf Steiner's lectures and anthroposophy in the overall educational practice. In what ways do the teachers adhere to his ideas in their practice? What kinds of ideas do those in the local community have after attending these schools? With a somewhat idiosyncratic anthroposophical "deep structure", it becomes important for Waldorf educators to teach in a way that conforms to the national learning objectives and meets one of the basic values of the core curriculum in Finland: "Teaching must be religiously, confessionally and politically independent" (Finnish National

Board of Education, 2016, p. 15). Independent schools must not stray from the democratic values outlined in the national core curriculum. As one of the informants said:

We come now to the question about the responsibility of private schools in relation to democracy. . . . How far can a provider of education go? What if it starts to challenge the democratic values that made educational variation possible in the first place? . . . How much freedom can be given? This is something that Waldorf education must also confront.

(D)

From the perspective of Finnish educational policy documents, the anthroposophical background of Waldorf education is not a problem in itself. As we have seen, the educational framework must be worked out in the local curriculum, in line with the national core curriculum. The ideological background should not conflict with the core values of the national curriculum. But a problem might arise if an ideological position narrows the space for educational judgements. The informant from the *National Board of Education* had looked at some of Steiner's most-read educational books and hinted at this problem when saying that

it is a very strange thought in our educational system that we would take a book written by a certain person, with a certain pedagogical view, and then start following it, as it is. . . . If we think about our [Finnish] comprehensive school, which has developed as a system over 50 years' time, . . . it is a hybrid of different things, so for me, it feels odd that you as a teacher in school would have certain books [by the same author] where you are told how things are supposed to go.

(F)

A very strong pedagogical authority is something untimely in the western society of today. If we think about the development of modern educational sciences, it is today a pluralistic field with a strong footing in empirical research. Being outside of, or in opposition to, this educational discussion might lead to an educational culture that is uncommunicative and self-referential. The previously mentioned informant noted that a strong emphasis on the original anthroposophical works of Rudolf Steiner might create a certain mindset where one perspective becomes the self-evident framework for answering all kinds of educational questions.

The interviews indicated a variety of positions existing within the Waldorf education movement in Finland, oscillating between traditional and progressive views. The concept of anthroposophy was not discussed often during the interviews, but when it was discussed, the informant usually referred to a

personal stance related to how religion is expressed in our secular society (see Taylor, 2007). For one of the Waldorf teachers, anthroposophy

does not imply any problems . . . and I can hold on to my own anthroposophy because I don't have to bring it up in discussions with the outside world . . . but amongst ourselves, internally [in Waldorf schools], it is a really difficult thing, I mean anthroposophy in the first place. It's not something you talk very much about. People are timid about it as a subject. And, since it might be banned, it does not interest us, it does not belong at this school . . . but my question is then: Can Waldorf schools exist without anthroposophy?

(C)

The informants who were not Waldorf teachers were not familiar with anthroposophy, and they took a neutral stance towards it without problematising it as such. The informant from the *National Board of Education* was quite clear, though, about problems that can arise when “Rudolf Steiner’s thinking and anthroposophy are strongly present [in the background], and they [teachers], at the same time, are obliged to follow this [national core] curriculum” (F). If there is resistance to adapting to the national curriculum, it usually comes from the schools where there are teachers “that have a desire to follow Rudolf Steiner’s teaching very strictly” (F).

From another point of view, in the case of a Waldorf parent, anthroposophy has only a very remote role in pupils’ learning. It is not something you confront as a parent, and it is not considered relevant when your children are at school. The informant wanted to emphasise the educational practice of Waldorf schools, not anthroposophy as such when making judgements about the school:

I really don't think Waldorf schools constitute a religious sect. They are two different things, anthroposophy and Waldorf education, even if both are connected to Rudolf Steiner. When it comes to learning, I like the system present in Waldorf schools more, the holistic approach to education . . . I dare not say that you learn better in a Waldorf school, but you learn in another way, and that was a way I [as a parent] appreciated very much.

(E)

As was mentioned earlier, few families today choose Waldorf schools because of their specific philosophical background. While many potential Waldorf parents might find anthroposophy more off-putting than attractive, it is more the alternative educational practice that is of interest to them. Anthroposophy does not have to be a problem for Waldorf parents so long as it remains only in the background and does not conflict with the more common basic educational values. According to the interviews, the role of anthroposophy in

Waldorf schools in Finland is, overall, not very strong, which is in line with the process of adaptation and integration. This was also how a university teacher conceived of the role of anthroposophy in Waldorf education while still allowing for the possibility of excesses:

My interpretation is that Finnish Waldorf has a rather wide scope and, in that way, leaves quite a lot of space for teachers to operate. I have never met any “Waldorf fundamentalists”, but I am sure there are some, and was there not some kind of excess somewhere? At least when it comes to vaccines, there was something in Lohja . . .

(D)

The informant was referring to an incident from 2014, where the pupils in one Waldorf school were exposed to measles, and it turned out that about 50% of the pupils in the school had not been vaccinated against it (MPR vaccine).¹⁴ The previously mentioned quote indicates an instance of negative publicity in media directed at Waldorf schools, in which they appeared as isolated school communities with strong ideological or even conspiratorial values. Another recent case was a Swedish TV series about a rather radical Waldorf school in Sweden, also shown on Finnish TV. Rather surprisingly, it did not generate any kind of public debate in Finland.¹⁵ Neither did the Covid-19 crisis result in any negative publicity for Waldorf schools. However, despite the absence of any recent public attacks on Waldorf schools in Finland, they still face suspicion from different directions. This point was noted by the informant from the *National Board of Education*:

There is a form of suspicion against them, as in “What kind of fuss is this?”, which I do not see in the same way against Christian schools, and they are not as organised as Waldorf schools. It is quite interesting, this suspicion, considering that they have been in Finland [since 1955].

(F)

People’s attitudes regarding alternative educational movements vary depending on where in the country they live. If a Waldorf school has existed in the municipality for some time, it might become a part of the local culture and

14 More than 90% of people in Finland have received the MPR vaccine: see Myllyniemi (2014, January 24). *Lapsia ei rokotettu – erittäin tarttuva tauti iski kyläkouluun*. *Iltä-Sanomat*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230801145414/www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000000707472.html> (memento from 2023, August 1).

15 The television series *De utvalda barnen* [The chosen children] (2019) gave rise to a large public debate in Sweden. In Finland, it was shown by the public broadcasting company YLE: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230801145636/https://areena.yle.fi/1-50857759> (memento from 2023, August 1).

an acceptable alternative. In other places, the suspicion might run quite deep, as expressed in this quote:

Not very many have a clue about what is going on in a Waldorf school. For the most part, when I mention, as a parent, that my children are or have been in Waldorf schools, people are first quiet, and then you can read from their faces that “okay, this is some kind of nutty [*börrhö*] school” . . . and I always have to explain to them about it, yes, there are really strong prejudices.

(E)

Conclusions

Finland has a reputation for strong public education. It has become part of Finland’s brand and even a source of national pride. From a political standpoint, there is rather little polarisation between opposing positions concerning education and a certain consensus about the direction of educational development. This study has demonstrated that Finnish educational policy allows for considerable educational variation to the pervasive comprehensive school model. Waldorf schools are the most widespread and best-known examples of alternative education movements in Finland. However, neither public discussions nor academic research have paid much attention to independent schools or alternative education, partly because of the small number of schools.

Waldorf schools represent a soft and holistic alternative to mainstream education. In Finland, they have a somewhat good reputation as a pedagogical alternative, with teaching methods and a view on learning that enriches the pedagogical field. The positive reputation stems in part from the fact that Waldorf teachers participate in curriculum-building working groups on a national level, which for the Waldorf movement is a strong signal of integration within the educational system and approval of its pedagogy. At the same time, several people are suspicious of Waldorf schools because of their anthroposophical underpinnings. The informants could not mention offhand particular groups that might be either for or against Waldorf education in society, but suspicions do emerge in different situations nonetheless. It seemed more a matter of people’s personal views than a prejudice or conception that operates at a group level.

The rather stable position that Waldorf schools have achieved in Finland is maintained through their active communication and collaboration with the *National Board of Education*. Waldorf schools have adapted to the national core curriculum and have a quite pragmatic view of their own pedagogy. Despite their well-integrated position within society, the number of pupils entering Waldorf schools is slightly decreasing.¹⁶ In the interviews, there was

16 During the period of 2000–2021, the number of pupils in Finnish Waldorf schools (grade 1–9) increased between 2000–2011 and has been slightly decreasing since. There were 3,696 pupils in 2000, 4,104 pupils in 2011, and 3,642 pupils in 2021 (see Pale, 2023)

much talk from within the movement about the need to develop Waldorf education further and its role within society in the future. There is a trend in Waldorf schools of playing down the tradition and being open to new research and developments in education, but without losing their own identity. The recent curriculum changes in basic education have transformed the Finnish comprehensive school system, with more of a focus on student participation, the integration of different subjects, and an emphasis on phenomena-based learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). An interesting question is how this development in mainstream education has affected the public view of Waldorf education as a pedagogical alternative.

Finally, the challenge seemingly faced by Waldorf schools in Finland could be described as a certain tension: without adapting and changing with the times, their alternative becomes out of date. By adapting too much, though, they risk losing the originality of offering an alternative way of learning. One of the Waldorf teachers pointed out in the interview that, seen from Central Europe, the Finnish Waldorf schools are not conceived as “real Waldorf schools” but more like schools “inspired by Waldorf”. For this informant, it is one thing to be “well received in the educational system” but quite another to adequately address the question of “How do we keep our pedagogy alive, as an own Waldorf pedagogy?” (C).

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