

*Routledge Research in International and Comparative Education*

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

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS THE WORLD OVER,  
1987–2004**

Edited by  
*Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann and Marc Fabian Buck*



“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 comparative study of a contested form of alternative pedagogy in a range of societal contexts.”

**Peter Staudenmaier** *Associate Professor of  
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# Critically Assessing the Reputation of Waldorf Education in Academia and the Public: Recent Developments the World Over, 1987–2004

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Spanning the period 1987–2004, this second volume focuses on more recent developments in Waldorf education 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 underresearched 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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# **Critically Assessing the Reputation of Waldorf Education in Academia and the Public: Recent Developments the World Over, 1987–2004**

**Edited by Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann  
and Marc Fabian Buck**

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# 1 Steiner Education in Japan

## Its Development and Potential

*Atsubiko Yoshida and Yoshiyuki Nagata*

Steiner education in Japan has developed over a period of 35 years. Alongside a continuity of practices inherited from Europe, it has generated a culture of its own. Its practice presents a unique trajectory of both challenges and insights that opens up possibilities for the future. In this chapter, we would like to clarify the special features of Steiner education in Japan, using quantitative data such as the number of schools and students, as well as qualitative data obtained from interviews with practitioners active in the Steiner education movement in Japan. Furthermore, we will examine hints that Steiner education in Japan may provide for the international Steiner education movement.

### Overview of the Steiner School Movement in Japan

#### *Summary of Steiner Schools in Japan*

First, based on information obtained with the cooperation of the *Japan Waldorf Schools Association* (JWSA), we introduce a summary of Steiner schools in Japan.

#### *Changes in the Number of Schools and Students*

Changes in the number of Steiner schools and students in Japan are shown in Figure 1.1.

The first Steiner school in Japan was founded in Tokyo in 1987. Between 1999 and 2009, six schools were established, spread across the country from the island of Hokkaido in the north to the island of Kyushu in the south. In the 2010s, the number of member schools of the *Japan Waldorf Schools Association* (JWSA) settled at seven. As of 2022, the number of primary, secondary, and high school students across the seven schools was 1,071. The number of students continued to increase steadily every year in the 2000s. However, after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, there was a period of slight decline in primary and secondary school enrolment, and enrolment remained flat in the first half of the 2010s. With the development of JWSA activities



## 2 Atsuhiko Yoshida and Yoshiyuki Nagata

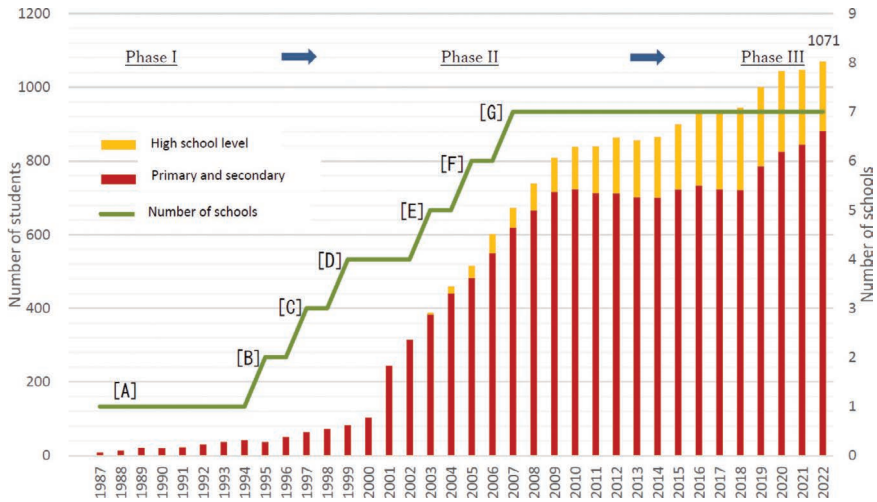


Figure 1.1 Japan Steiner schools: changes in number of schools and students. (Data from JWSA Survey, April 2022.)

such as collaborative teacher training and events marking the 100th anniversary of Steiner schools, enrolment numbers have started to increase again.

Based on Figure 1.1 and the history of the seven schools in the following section, the Steiner education movement in Japan can be understood as roughly comprising three phases: Phase I (the period of conception) until around 1994, Phase II (the period of development) from around 1995 to 2014, and Phase III (the period of succession) from 2015 onwards (the characteristics of each period are described next).

### Outline of the Seven Schools in Japan

The following is an overview of each of the seven schools ([A]–[G]) in Figure 1.1.

[A] *Fujino Waldorf School* (Kanagawa Prefecture): Founded in 1987, the school originated as the *Tokyo Steiner School*, with one first-year class. By 2000, it had grades 1–6, and from 2001, higher-grade classes were added sequentially. In April 2005, the school was relocated to Fujino, Kanagawa Prefecture, and accorded legal status as a school. In 2012, the upper secondary school was also authorised, creating the only 12-grade approved Steiner school in Japan.

[B] *Tokyo-Kenji Steiner School* (Tokyo): Beginning as the *Kenji School Movement* in 1994, the primary school opened in 1999. The school moved to the current location in 2004 and opened its high school in 2005. In 2011, it was accredited as a member of the UNESCO *Associated Schools*

- Network* (ASPnet), and it was selected as a *Sustainable School* by the *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* (MEXT) in 2016. Currently, it has legal status as an NPO (non-profit organisation).
- [C] *Hokkaido Steiner School Izumi no Gakko* (Hokkaido): The school was established in 1999. In 2006, a “special zone for structural reform” was authorised by the government in that area, and in 2008, the school was accorded legal status as a school with primary and lower secondary levels. In 2009, it was approved as a “curriculum exception school,” allowing for deviation from the standard national curriculum. The kindergarten and high school continue to be run by a non-profit organisation.
- [D] *Kyotanabe Steiner School* (Kyoto Prefecture): The school was founded in 2001 as a non-profit organisation (NPO) based on Saturday classes that had been started in 1995. In 2003, a second school building was completed and a high school opened, with the first class graduating in 2007. In 2009, the school was accredited as a *UNESCO–ASPnet School* (the first NPO ASP school in Japan). In 2016, the school was selected as a *Sustainable School* by MEXT. It currently has legal status as an NPO.
- [E] *Yokohama Steiner School* (Kanagawa Prefecture): The school was established in 2005 by the citizens association *Create a Steiner School in Yokohama* (founded in 2002). In 2011, the school was accredited as a *UNESCO–ASPnet School* in 2011 and opened its second building. It was selected as a “good practice” at the *UNESCO ESD World Congress* in 2014 and as a *Sustainable School* in 2016 by MEXT. It currently has legal status as an NPO.
- [F] *Aichi Steiner School* (Aichi Prefecture): In 2005, the *Association for the Establishment of Aichi Steiner School* was founded and launched Saturday classes. In 2007, the school opened, and in 2009, the school moved to its current location. In 2019, a new school building was completed. It currently has legal status as an NPO.
- [G] *Fukuoka Steiner School* (Fukuoka): In 2009, the voluntary organisation *Fukuoka Steiner School* was founded, and in 2017 it obtained NPO status. In 2018, a nursery school was opened, and in 2022, the school moved to a new building at its current location with multiple grade levels.

Furthermore, school development initiatives inspired by Steiner education exist in Sendai, Chiba, Wakayama, Kagoshima, Okinawa, and elsewhere.

### *Founding of JWSA and Its Activities*

The *Japan Waldorf Schools Association* (JWSA) was established on 18 August 2013, with the seven full-time Steiner schools nationwide just listed as the main members. This is a milestone in Phase II (the development phase), as it permitted a transition from each school developing its own activities to cooperating on common issues among the schools. In addition, before the establishment of the JWSA, the network of teachers and the network of school

administrators were working separately;<sup>1</sup> the association enabled them to collaborate on issues of shared importance such as overcoming stagnation and the difficulty in growing student numbers.

The JWSA cooperates on educational and social communication initiatives to promote Steiner education, strengthen the quality of school management, and train teachers, while serving as the contact point in Japan for Steiner school education. The association holds biannual meetings where activities such as the following are discussed:

- **Conferences:** The *National Gathering of Waldorf Educators* is held annually. In 2015, the *Asian Waldorf Teachers' Conference* was held in Japan.
- **Teacher training:** An annual teacher training programme is implemented through collaboration among all the schools and has resulted in a full-fledged collaborative teacher training course provided since 2018. As of 2022, 128 participants have taken the course.
- **Events marking the 100th anniversary of Steiner schools:** These were developed through cooperation with Steiner schools across the country, and publicity activities were strengthened through collaboration.
- **School management:** In 2022, five study sessions on collaboration and organisational management were held together with parents.

These activities, and especially teacher training, enhance the autonomy of Steiner schools, provide mutually beneficial quality assurance, and strengthen their public profile. It can be said that the key to Phase III, in which sustainability will be an issue, is whether Phase II developments continue and enable a generational change to take place.

#### *Position of Steiner Schools Within the Public Education System*

As seen in the previous section, five of the seven Steiner schools in Japan are non-profit organisations and not approved as schools within the formal public education system. Here we address the issue of the position of Steiner schools within the public education system.

#### *Circumstances of Unapproved, Non-Profit Schools (Five Schools)*

Based on co-author Yoshida's 12 years of action research (Yoshida, 2012, 2016, 2020a), let's take a closer look at the circumstances of the continued

1 On the teacher's side, Steiner school teachers from Japan who attended the *Asia Waldorf Teachers' Conference in Taiwan (AWTC)* in May 2005 gathered at school [A] in August. This became the first *National Gathering of Waldorf Teachers* and has been held annually since then. On the management side, a study meeting on the "Special Zones for Structural Reform" system led to the establishment of the *National Liaison Committee for the Management of Steiner Schools* in 2004. These two parties set up a joint meeting in 2012, and the JWSA was officially established in 2013.

operation of an unapproved school that is a non-profit organisation, using school [D] as a case study. The driving force behind the creation of school [D] was the power of parents who sent their children to a Steiner kindergarten and wanted to continue this education after primary school. After meeting like-minded teachers, they started with classes held only on Saturdays, aiming at opening a full-time school. However, establishing an approved school was financially impossible for the parents, who were ordinary citizens without the backing of a religious organisation or sponsors. To become an approved school in Japan, it must own a large outdoor play area and a fully equipped school building, which requires a large amount of capital. However, as the children attending the Saturday classes would be growing older regardless of the situation, parents made the decision to start the full-time school as an NPO. The group leased a site that had been a car park and gradually constructed a wooden school building on it, also renting a nearby public gymnasium and swimming pool.

Children of compulsory school age (6–15) attend the school, but as it is not an approved school, families have sometimes been suspected of violating their schooling obligations with the irregular curriculum and poor school facilities. In their school registrations, the children have been treated as truants of the public school in their place of residence with long-term absences from school. To counter this, families communicate about their children's learning to these local schools by sharing notebooks showing what students have learned, school quarterly magazines, etc. The school also organised a notebook exhibition at the city library, which was visited by local school officials. After a few years of such efforts, the irregular absences from school were tolerated by having *Kyotanabe Steiner School* submit a list of students enrolled to the school board at the beginning of the spring of each school year (cf. *Kyotanabe Steiner School*, 2015).

*Becoming an Approved School Under “the Special Zone System”  
(Two Schools)*

In 2005, the *Tokyo Steiner School* became an approved school under the government's “special zone for structural reform” system (school [A]). The local government-side partner, the former town of Fujino (now merged with Sagami-hara City), had the idea of a *Fujino Furusato Art Village* (Fujino Hometown Art Village) to halt the declining birthrate and ageing population in this depopulated area. For that reason, *Tokyo Steiner School* was matched with a school that emphasised an arts approach and was provided with a closed town school building through the *Fujino Education and Arts Special Zone*. Similarly, a Steiner school [C] in Hokkaido was converted into an approved school through the *Nature and Art Education Special Zone*, in line with the town of Toyoura's measures to address depopulation. The two schools have been able to obtain public financial support as approved schools and, by being granted special exceptions to the usual curriculum, have relative freedom in terms of curriculum.

Amidst this trend of special zones, the *Kyotanabe Steiner School* ([D]) explored similar possibilities. However, in the city of Kyotanabe, a suburb of Osaka and Kyoto where residential development is booming, the city government had no need for a special zone designation to counter an issue like depopulation. In addition, it would be a hurdle for school families to relocate to a distant location with a closed school in order to enable incorporation as a “special zone school.” Further, even if the school could obtain this status, significant concerns remain concerning the teacher licensing system and other areas where government administration would play a role. Other urban Steiner schools in Tokyo ([B]), Yokohama ([E]), Nagoya ([F]), and Fukuoka ([G]) continue to operate as NPOs for generally similar reasons (cf. Yoshida, 2012).

*Accreditation as a UNESCO School and ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) Promotion Base School*

The unapproved non-profit Steiner schools were forced to operate without any public subsidy, which continued to make it difficult for them to manage from a business standpoint. Because tuition has to be high, attracting students is not easy. At the same time, poverty and widening inequality have deepened in Japan since the 2010s, and this has been a factor in the lack of growth in the number of schools and students. On the other hand, with regard to public recognition, achievements have been made. One is accreditation as an *ASPnet School* (UNESCO Associated Schools Network). This accreditation is granted not by the Japanese *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* but by UNESCO’s Paris headquarters. In response to the *International Decade for ESD* (2005–2014) promoted by UNESCO, school [D] was first accredited as an *ASPnet School* in 2009, followed by schools [B] and [E] in 2011. Following accreditation, these schools carried out activities centring on ESD practices in collaboration with other ASPnet public schools. In conjunction with the *World Conference of UNESCO Schools* held in Japan in the final year of the *International Decade of ESD* (2014), school [E] was selected as a *Good Practice School*, and high school students from school [D] chaired the *World Forum of High School Students*.

Furthermore, in 2016, schools [B], [D], and [E] were selected as *Sustainable Schools* under the MEXT’s *Schools Emphasising ESD* project. Although they are non-profit organisations rather than officially approved schools, their achievements were highly evaluated. Teachers from the 24 *Sustainable Schools* selected from across Japan met four times a year in Tokyo to exchange practices and learn from one another, and they jointly developed a vision and evaluation methods for implementing a whole school approach (cf. Yoshida, 2016).

Even though these UNESCO schools and *Sustainable Schools* were unapproved as schools in Japan, their activities gained public recognition for the quality of the education generated by their innovative ESD practices.

### *Current Situation Regarding Positioning of NPO Schools Within the Educational System*

In considering the place of Steiner schools in public education, the developments surrounding the *Act on Securing Educational Opportunities Equivalent to Regular Education in the Compulsory Education Stage* (Act 2016) are also important. This is a new law that recognises a variety of learning settings, such as non-profit organisations that are not formal schools, and positions them within Japan's public education system. It recognises that these NPOs and other places of learning provide appropriate and important educational opportunities to the more than 240,000 children in Japan who face challenges in attending regular schools (approximately 2% of the school-age population) and provides for public authorities to collaborate to support these schools. During the process of passing the law, debate was contentious as to whether alternative schools, including Steiner schools, should be eligible for similar public support. A conclusion, however, was reached: alternative schools would be considered outside the framework of the Act, as children who attend these schools by choice from the first year of school age are not deprived of educational opportunities because of their difficulties (cf. Yoshida, 2020b).

There was strong opposition to the expansion of educational options and liberalisation in the establishment of schools, partly because the deregulation through the “special zone system” discussed earlier was a policy of the neo-liberal administration. Opposition came from the standpoint of the importance of the public nature of public education. Now, in the years following the Act, the academic debate on the merits of the Act continues, as it touches on a fundamental tension between freedom and publicness in education. This issue will be examined again in “Debates on freedom and publicness in Steiner schools” later in this chapter.

### *Acceptance of Steiner's Educational Ideas in Academia*

Although Steiner schools in Japan face difficulties in positioning themselves within the public education system, acceptance of Steiner education and its ideas in academia has made steady but gradual progress since the beginning of this century.

### *Status of Selection of Steiner Education Research Within Government-Funded Research Programs*

Below we look at the cumulative number of studies on Steiner education and its ideas that have been selected for *Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research*,<sup>2</sup>

2 The grants provide financial support for creative and pioneering research projects that will make foundational contributions to social development. Projects are selected using a peer-review screening process (screening by multiple researchers whose field of specialisation is close to that of the applicant).



we must examine the largest competitive research fund administered by the government-funded *Japan Society for the Promotion of Science* (JSPS). Figure 1.2 provides this data.

In the field of education, one research proposal with “Steiner” in the title and one with “Steiner” as a keyword but not in the title were selected for the first time in 1995. Although the number selected did not increase until around 2001, it has steadily increased since then, and by 2022, the cumulative number of funded projects was 41, by 11 different authors. Outside the field of education, five research projects were selected in fields such as art, care, and literature; thus the projects funded were overwhelmingly in the field of education.

The selection process is quite competitive; in general a selection rate is approximately 20%, and this success in selection is probably an indicator of the academic acceptance of Steiner education and research in Japan. More than ¥130 million has been invested in Steiner educational research from state funds.

*Four Typologies of Steiner Education Research*

Figure 1.3 examines changes in the number of books on Steiner education and thought published over time. Japanese translations of Steiner’s writings and lectures were published intensively in the 1980s and early 1990s, the period of Phase I (i.e., conception). The first peak of books on Steiner education was 1988 (nine books in that year), with another major peak between 1999 and 2007. There was then a downturn in the 2010s, and only in recent years has the number of publications started to increase again. It is interesting to note that this trend roughly corresponds to the total number of students in Steiner schools, as seen in Figure 1.1.

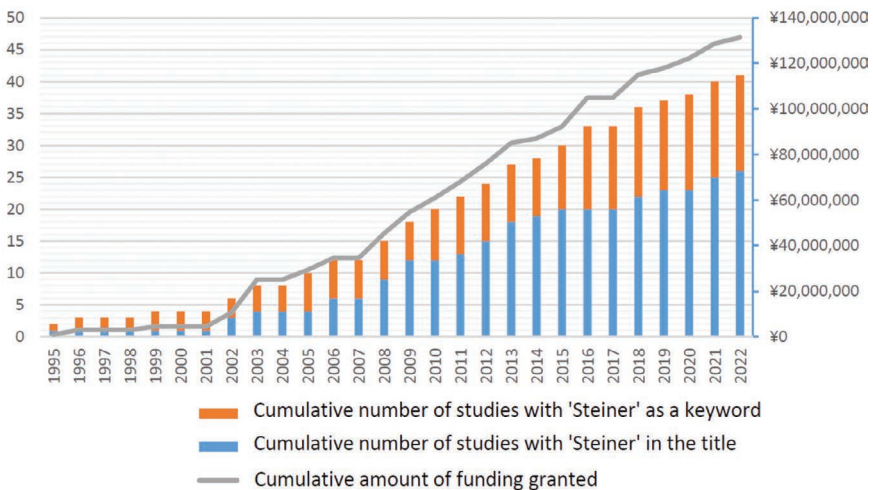


Figure 1.2 Funding granted for research on Steiner education in Japan.

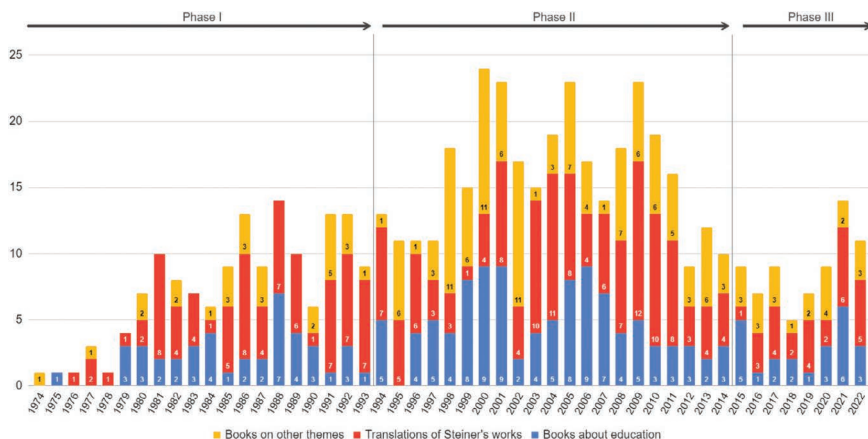


Figure 1.3 Number of books on Steiner education and thought over time.

Let us now turn to the content of those studies and books on Steiner education. According to Ito's study (2012), research on Steiner education and its ideas can be divided into four types:

- Type I: introduction or overview of Steiner's thoughts and education
- Type II: explanation of the methods and curriculum of Steiner's educational practice
- Type III: comparative or historical study of Steiner education or thought
- Type IV: research on Steiner education or its thought with the aid of other theories

During Phase I, the first generation of Steiner education researchers energetically produced Japanese translations and basic introductions of Steiner's works, and the majority of publications were of Type I and Type II. During this period, many publications described as research books amounted to inherent commentary from authors who positively accepted Steiner's ideas. In recent years, especially in Phase III, the results of research supported by scientific research funds have been published, and the number of Type III and IV books has increased. For example, of Type III, we see a study examining the historical context of Steiner education in the thought of Goethe, Schiller, and Nietzsche (Ito, 2012), as well as a study based on M. Sterner and mythology (Kono, 2021) that built on pioneering research connecting the thought of C. G. Jung and K. Wilber with Steiner education (Nisihira, 1997). Of Type IV, we see a study that examines academic validity in relation to rhythm and holism (Eto, 2019) and another that places Steiner education in the context of holistic pedagogy and alternative education (Yoshida, 2020a).



*Steiner Education Research With the Aid of Holistic Pedagogy*

It should be noted that the *Japan Holistic Education Association* (1997–2016) and the *Japan Holistic Education/Care Society* (2016–present) are the groups that have consciously engaged in Steiner research of Types III and IV. Early in Phase II, the Association edited and published *Steiner Education in Japan* (Yoshida & Imai, 2001) with an awareness of issues such as how Steiner education could gain roots in the climate and culture of Japan and how it could be used to advantage within the practice of public education (see also Yoshida, 2005). The authors employed a perspective that used holistic educational theory to understand the representative example of Steiner education, eschewing an absolutist view of Steiner education and schools in favour of ascertaining their significance within their broader context.<sup>3</sup>

Holistic theory takes a perspective on the whole person that emphasises the connection between will, emotion, and thought, and also has a deep concern with spirituality in all forms of life. It is therefore useful for understanding the essence of Steiner education while also remaining rooted in Japanese spiritual culture. The influence of *Steiner Education in Japan* can be seen from the fact that of the 41 research projects previously mentioned that included “Steiner” in the title or as a keyword, one-third, or 14 projects, included the words “holistic” or “holism.”

In this way, the earlier tendency for Steiner’s ideas to be shunned in Japan by pedagogical academics for being mystical or occult is being overcome. Therefore, from the academic perspective, the reason for the limited spread of Steiner schools in Japan is not so much a matter of pedagogy or ideological approach but rather something else. That is, there are significant questions from the perspectives of the sociology of education and public education policy theory, as we shall see next. Let us now examine these questions in depth.

**Debates on Freedom and Publicness in Steiner Schools**

Controversial debates continue in academia and among policy makers in Japan regarding the public positioning of alternative schools, including Steiner schools. In particular, since the *Education Opportunity Act 2016* had its impact, as just discussed, there has been an active debate on the boundaries of the public education system (cf. Kimura, 2020; Omomo & Seto, 2020). In the following discussion, we focus not only on the debate over freedom from state control in terms of curriculum but also on whether deregulation in the establishment of schools and allowing parents freedom of choice in education is contrary to the public interest, which is important for public education (cf. Nagata 2016).

3 In 2008, the project *Research on Practical Case Studies of Japanese Steiner Schools from the Perspective of Holistic Pedagogy* (Principal Investigator: Atsuhiko Yoshida) was selected as one of the JSPS *Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research*. Yoshida has continued this work to this day through joint research with the next generation of researchers.

*Criticisms Concerning the Public Nature of Alternative Schools*

The critical arguments of leading academic commentators in Japan against extending the freedom to establish alternative schools outside of formal schooling can be categorised as coming from three main sources (Yoshida, 2023):

**Criticism from the perspectives of equality and reducing inequalities:** First, there is criticism that emphasises the importance of increasing equality within the welfare state. In other words, by guaranteeing equal education to all children, regardless of economic or educational capital disparities, public education achieves its significance of breaking the intergenerational chain of disparities and guaranteeing education impartially as a human right. Neoliberal policies of educational diversification, with their emphasis on free choice and self-responsibility, have not corrected such disparities but has rather widened them. The expansion of alternative school options supports these neoliberal ideas of deregulation and freedom in the education system.

**Criticism from the perspective of social integration:** Criticism here comes from both the left and right on the political spectrum, from a position that emphasises the national integration function of public education (neoliberalism) and a position that emphasises the formation of a democratic civil society (liberal citizenship education). This criticism says that the expansion of alternative schools that are not based on a standardised common national curriculum will undermine national identity, the knowledge base we should have in common as citizens, and education that nurtures the qualities we need as members of civil society. Further, the expansion of parental freedom to educate leads to the erosion of the public sphere by the private desires of parents. In this view, the content of education to develop the human resources (human capital) for future society should be determined by public social consensus, not by private desire.

**Criticism in terms of openness to heterogeneity:** These criticisms emphasise the importance of including heterogeneity and diversity within public schools. Positions emphasise the importance of inclusive education for co-existence with minorities and the political cohesiveness that comes from a manifestation of heterogeneity and plurality advocated by one of the most influential political philosophers, Hannah Arendt. In this view, public education gets its *raison d'être* in being open to all and inclusive of diversity and heterogeneity, and therefore segregated, separate learning should not be promoted. Liberalising the establishment of alternative schools with their own philosophies, such as Steiner education, would mean that children from families with highly homogeneous backgrounds who choose such schools would learn in these closed environments. There is also a high risk that children will become victims of parental egoism due to parents' personal educational choices.

In these views, the private nature of education, the freedom to educate and the freedom to set up schools are opposed to an inclusive society that emphasises equality, communality and openness. And at present, there is a strong tendency in academic pedagogy to favour the former. What, then, are the possible arguments against these views? Let us consider the case of Steiner schools in Japan.

*Responding to Criticism: Examining the Case of Steiner Schools*

One of the authors has recently conducted a series of studies on the inclusion of alternative schools within the Japanese public education system (Yoshida, 2022, 2023). Using this background, the following is a summary of counter-arguments supporting the public significance of Steiner schools.

*From the Perspective of Securing Diverse Educational Opportunities*

Founded in 1919 by Emil Molt with Rudolf Steiner serving as the spiritus rector, the first Steiner school was for the children of poor workers and was not conceived as an elite private school for the upper classes. In Japan, Steiner schools do not offer competitive examination education. Thus it is rare to find parents who expect Steiner schools to train people to triumph in the competitive global marketplace, and these parents have chosen values that differ from those of neoliberalism. On the other hand, the reality of Steiner schools in Japan is that there are certainly hurdles to enrolment for families in financial need. At the five unapproved schools that do not receive public subsidies, tuition fees of around ¥50,000 per month (about 10% of the average salary) are charged. As they are reluctant to charge this much, [D] school actively solicits donations and has developed tuition reduction and scholarship programmes; however, the school struggles to raise enough funds (Nishimura, 2013). To improve the situation, the *Japan Waldorf Schools Association*, in collaboration with other alternative schools, has joined a campaign group calling for legislation to enable public funding and has played an important role in this “campaign for the Act 2016” (cf. Yoshida, 2016, 2020b).

The issue of ensuring equal educational opportunities is probably more a problem of Japan’s public education system, which lacks a flexible public funding system, than a problem inherent to alternative schools. To ensure that education is of a quality commensurate with public funding, the logical step is to introduce an accreditation system. However, it is important that such a system does not end up under centralised management by the government and that it is nurturing and based on voluntarism and mutual certification (Nagata, 2007). At present, the *Japan Waldorf Schools Association* is in the process of developing the function of an intermediary support organisation for independent quality assurance, including coordinating cooperative teacher training and curriculum management among member schools, as well as an autonomous accreditation system.

It should be added that in the field of sociology of education in Japan, the argument has recently emerged that equalisation to correct economic disparities should not be considered an issue of education policy but, like basic income, should be separated out as an issue of universal social security (Nihei, 2019).

*From the Perspective of Collaborative Society Formation*

Even while being non-profit and unapproved, Steiner schools have participated actively in the formation of public society. As previously seen, they have engaged in practical exchanges with public schools as *UNESCO/ASPnet Schools and Sustainable Schools*. As an additional case, in 2011, school [D] held a public event garnering about 140 participations in Kyotanabe City titled *Schools Created Together – The Rich Potential of New Forms of Public Schools* with the support of the *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology*; the boards of education of Kyoto Prefecture, Kyoto City, and Kyotanabe City; the *Kyoto Prefectural Regional Creation Fund*; and others (cf. Yoshida, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

What is the stance of Steiner schools towards the position emphasising education's function in national integration and training members of the state? For Steiner schools, the aim is not to train those who form modern nation-states but rather to educate people with an emphasis on the spiritual solidarity of humanity, which is not subordinate to the interests of political states. It can be said that priority is given to the formation of global citizens who can prioritise the interests of humanity over national interests. At the same time, Steiner education does not disregard love for one's home area or cultural identity; rather it has a strong orientation towards understanding the intrinsic value of culture rooted in one's own climate and creatively passing it on for the future. Steiner schools in Japan stand opposed to modern civilisation in which unique, local culture tends to be swept away by the waves of globalisation; the education aims at enabling students to experience the universal values of the spiritual culture that has been handed down to them. This point has been a focus of Steiner schools in non-Christian countries such as in Asia in recent years (see, for example, the section "Hollow Structure: Uniqueness in Operation" of this Chapter).

What about Steiner education in terms of fostering citizenship to form a democratic civil society? There is a weakness in that Steiner schools do not follow the national curriculum, which systematically teaches the knowledge that citizens should have in common. However, the content of citizenship may be seen as the ability not only to adapt to the current state of society but also to distance oneself from it, to think critically based on one's own values, and to explore and problem-solve through dialogue. If this is the case, with elements

4 School [D] was introduced as an example of NPO activities in the education sector at the second meeting of the Japanese Government Cabinet Office's "New Public" Promotion Council (11 November 2010), which led to the holding of this active "town hall" event.

like the project-based inquiry learning that is heavily embedded in the Waldorf high school curriculum, Steiner education can be described as pioneering citizenship education that fosters agency within civil society. Furthermore, within these schools that are established by parents and teachers together, children learn by watching the adults creating something new and handmade through collaboration and dialogue. The style of managing the schools via persistent consensus-building through sequential meetings can be said to be a model of democratic living or public citizenship (see the section of “Circumstances of Unapproved, Non-Profit Schools (Five Schools)” of this Chapter).

*From the Perspective of Publicness as Openness to Heterogeneity*

Alternative schools created outside the school system by children and families with different educational needs – different from the standard and dominant values – become highly homogeneous spaces within which those who share the same values cohere. This direction is contrary to the public-oriented philosophy of inclusive education, in which there is mutual learning in the school through the inclusion of diversity and heterogeneity. In response to this criticism, one of the authors of this article and Nishimura have already published a reflection based on action research in Steiner schools (Nishimura & Yoshida, 2008). Here we will just note the conclusions.

First, it is important to recognise that the significance of diversity and heterogeneity in schools differs from that of adult public society, given the developmental tasks of children. High self-esteem has been pointed out as a characteristic of Steiner school pupils. In primary and secondary school, they grow up in a considerably homogeneous and protected setting. In high school, there is a complete turnaround, and the curriculum is rich in opportunities for out-of-school social experiences and cross-cultural exchanges. The ability of these students to go outside the school and meet adults for the first time without fear is probably due to their stable sense of trust in people and the world and their high sense of self-esteem. In other words, children who grow up in a learning environment where they share the same aspirations will, over time, have a solid springboard for entering into relationships with those different from themselves with a feeling of openness. The issues of homogeneity and diversity, as well as communality and publicness, then, need to be differentiated for adult society and for children’s educational settings. Homogeneity and community, which support children’s development, should be seen not as hindering the diversity and publicness of adult society but as forming the basis for it.<sup>5</sup>

5 Holistic research on multiculturalism in education is instructive in this regard. The importance of education that immerses children in their family’s own culture in childhood in order to enhance self-esteem is evident and can be applied to the tensions between the alternative culture of the Waldorf family and the dominant culture of the wider society (see Yoshida, 2009).

Second, parents' wishes for their children, which are said to be "private," have an ambiguous character that cannot necessarily be judged as being against the public interest. In Steiner schools, and especially in non-profit schools where parents also need to continue to support the school, the parents do not entrust their children to a ready-made school that provides the educational services of their choice. They themselves take part in the creation of the school. They are concerned about the future society that students will enter after graduation and, further, about the children whom they have not yet seen but who will be enrolled in the future. The earnestness of the wish for one's own child, which is the driving force, can have a dual nature, as it can easily turn into egoism. However, it also has the potential to open up a public consciousness – aspirations for "our children" within the school community and, beyond that, for the unspecified number of "everyone's children." Collaboration in building school communities with people who share the same interests, based on free will, may serve as a model for individuals freed from the fetters of the old style of community, based on geographical and blood ties, to go beyond closed individualism and form a new community as autonomous citizens. The case of the non-profit Steiner schools shows us this possibility of opening up an educational public sphere between "public" and "private" based on a civic publicness (Yoshida, 2009).

Finally, and more fundamentally, it should be asked again whether absorbing everyone's heterogeneity within a centralised public education system is an appropriate way to respect the diversity of society as a whole. Rather, given the common and open nature of publicness, we should not clearly fix the boundary between the inside and the outside of the public education system but should be flexible and open, demonstrating tentativeness, intersectionality, and responsiveness. Only then can we say that publicness is open to heterogeneous and diverse educational actors. Concerning this point, please refer to a separate paper where this is discussed (Yoshida, 2023).

### **Characteristics of Steiner Education in Japan Discerned Through Interviews**

As mentioned in chapter 1, looking back at the historical development of Steiner education in Japan, after the first generation, which introduced knowledge from Europe and worked to spread it through the publication of translations and other books, and the second generation, which put Steiner education on track by working to realise educational practice through building schools, a third generation is currently being nurtured. The "first," "second," and "third" phases shown in Figure 1.1 have shifted along with generational change, but, naturally, the second generation formed the movement along with the first generation in the first period, and the second generation gradually took over the centre of the movement in the second period. In the current third phase, the third generation has taken over the movement

together with the second generation and is tasked with helping it mature in a sustainable way.

For this section, we have interviewed three educators who have worked to promote the Steiner education movement in Japan from among the second generation, which is at the centre of the historical development among the three generations. We would like to discuss the difficulties they faced when promoting Steiner education, the practices they tried in the midst of various conflicts, and what they have learned from their experiences. Furthermore, as Japan has developed Steiner education in a unique way at the periphery of the European “centre” of Steiner education, we would like to discuss any special insights their experiences offer for others.

The educators interviewed were Rieko Hata, representative of the *Japan Steiner Education Association*; Mariko Nakamura, vice representative; and Shigeo Nakamura, a teacher at the *Kyotanabe Steiner School*. For 35 years, Hata has been involved in educational and administrative activities at *Steiner Gakuen*, the first Steiner school in Japan, and now incorporated as an official school. She is also active as an eurhythmist, both at home and abroad, and has recently spent an extended period of time teaching in Taiwan. Mariko Nakamura has been a primary teacher at the *Kyotanabe Steiner School* for 21 years, or 26 years including its predecessor, the Saturday class. Shigeo Nakamura has been a teacher at the upper secondary school of the *Kyotanabe Steiner School* for 26 years, including the preparatory period for its establishment. In the following discussion, Rieko Hata is referred to as “Hata,” while Mariko Nakamura is referred to as “Mariko,” and Shigeo Nakamura as “Shigeo.” Some parts of the interview that were inaudible have been added or corrected after checking with the person in question at a later date.

### *Steiner Education as a “World Tree”*

In Hata’s view, the history of Steiner education in Japan goes back some 35 years. The first generation learned the principles of the educational practices and the ideas behind them mainly from Germany and introduced Steiner education in Japan through numerous translated books and field reports. The second generation then scrambled to create schools, positioning them within and outside the school education system, opening them and putting school practice on track. Currently, together with the second generation, the third generation is working on the creation of new schools while also facing global challenges, such as running schools, at one point, in the midst of the coronavirus public health emergency.

It is worth noting here that there is a shift in perception of Steiner education, which originated in Europe, between the first and second generations, with the latter viewing the original education more relatively than the former. Hata emphasises that “Steiner education, for example,



has one common curriculum, but the way in which it is realised really differs from country to country, ethnicity to ethnicity, and climate to climate” and that “its manifestation as an educational culture really differs from country to country, ethnicity to ethnicity, and from one school to another.”

For Hata, Steiner education is essentially “like seeds.” We plant “seeds that flew in from somewhere” in the soil beneath our feet and nurture them. “However, they don’t grow using the same cultivation method, so we try making adjustments here and there. And the seeds themselves change and something different blooms,” she says. In Hata’s view, unique Steiner education seeds have been grown in Japan through various innovations and trial and error, and now flowers that are rooted in the land can be seen blossoming.

The seeds here are not ones confined to the European region but are inherently universal, and Hata describes this point with the image of “a mythical world tree.” “Of course, he [R. Steiner] is European, and [. . .] the influences are truly European in various ways. However, the root of the original is not European, it is a world tree, a universal image of a human being.”

What connects this “universal vision of a human being” concretely to educational practice is the conception of the “stages of development” that is common across Steiner education and that guides the education. The “stages of development” look at the development of the child, which “happens across cultures.” In their daily practice, teachers such as Hata are able to improve the quality of their education by discussing with their colleagues what is “nourishing” for the children at each stage of development because they have a “universal human image.” Mariko calls this human view “the most interesting part of Steiner education.”

Furthermore, regarding the awareness of this universality, Hata says: “We have to look at what the root is [. . .]. Perhaps people in Asia, Africa and South America can do this more consciously than Europeans.” By the same token, perhaps a peripheral country like Japan can contribute to the universality of Steiner education in some way. Nonetheless, what probably matters most here and what becomes important in this age of globalisation is the creative tension between the local and universal aspects of Steiner education. We will examine this point later.

### *Second-Generation Discomfort and Practical Innovations*

It is actually debatable how much universality can be found in Steiner’s ideas, although this was also acknowledged by Hata. At the very least, it is not difficult to imagine that what the first generation brought to Japan was a Steiner education strongly imbued with European characteristics. However, as a result, some teachers in Japanese Steiner schools felt a certain degree of confusion. For example, school events from kindergarten to



upper secondary have “imported” the performance of European stories. While lower primary students have performed Old Testament stories familiar to the Japanese public, upper secondary students have performed the mediaeval itinerant tale of *Parsifal*, which is the basis of Wagner’s opera by that name. Many teachers have felt uncomfortable with this, and Hata is one of them.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of discomfort seems to be shared by schools when dealing with festivals. One example is a play performed at the *Michaelmas Festival* held by Steiner schools. The play tells the story of a terrifying black dragon that comes out and is vanquished. However, in Japan, dragons are usually regarded as sacred beasts, “something to be celebrated” and not as evil beings. This is evident in the white dragon in the internationally known movie *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki. On the other hand, there is a story in Japanese mythology in which a god called Susanoo slays a fearsome dragon called Yamata-no-orochi that plagues the human world, and a Steiner school can be seen performing this story.<sup>7</sup>

The second generation’s discomfort can also be attributed to the subject matter of the lessons. In the lower grades of Steiner schools, saints’ biographies and animal fables are taught, with saints’ biographies being used to teach about the sublime in humans and animal fables to teach about human folly and ridiculousness. Some teachers resist this identification, including Mariko, who says: “I don’t think many Asians have the sense that animals are foolish.” Shigeo also refers to the equality of the lives of all living things and says: “When I talk to children, I often feel that even insects have the same sense of life.” He adds: “From the perspective of how to view nature, I have a sense there are things that Asia can do and Japan can do in Steiner education.” It goes without saying that in this post-pandemic era, recognition that humans are part of nature with lives equal to other living creatures deserves special emphasis.

6 At this Steiner school, which started with only the second generation, festivals and other events were carefully discussed before opening to ensure that they would not be “imported”; school staff searched for a form that would best convey the meaning and quality of each festival to Japanese children. As a result, there is now a mixture of festivals, some of which retain their Western forms, such as the Christmas play, and others such as the Tanabata festival that differ from the Western Johannesian *Festivals* (Electronic communication with Mariko, 28 December 2022).

7 In the *Michaelmas Festival*, Michael, a symbol of cosmic power, uses an iron sword to defeat earthly forces that have become dragons, symbols of evil, and that have entangled human beings in their grasp. Although there are similarities with the Japanese story of the Yamata-no-orochi, in which the dragon is slain by Susanoo, who comes from the heavens, it is interesting to note that, in the Western version, iron, which is contained in meteorites and is a symbol of cosmic power, is brought from space, whereas in Japanese mythology the iron sword is taken from the tail of an earthly dragon. The latter could be seen as a symbolic representation of the Japanese mentality that perceives divinity in nature on earth (Electronic communication with Mariko, 28 December 2022).

As with the resistance they feel at the mention in class materials of the superiority of humans over plants and animals, many teachers are uncomfortable with the relationship with God that is depicted. In the case of Japan, it can be said that God is more of a familiar presence rather than a transcendent, absolute being. When Mariko uses the Japanese myth *Kojiki* in class, she says: “I feel that the relationship between gods and humans is closer in Japan and other Asian countries, and even in the *Kojiki*, gods and humans are intermingled in the story. In the *Kojiki*, the barrier between gods and humans is much lower than it is in Europe.”

In the case of eurythmist Hata, she felt the need to make changes to words and gestures used in eurythmy. In eurythmy, it is customary to learn the sounds appropriate to the stage of a child’s development, as each vowel and consonant is considered to have a formative power on the body and mind. However, in eurythmy, which was systematised in Europe, consonants are dominant over vowels and do not resonate with Japanese children. Therefore, for the Japanese language, one must devise ways to incorporate the power of vowels and change the way gestures and hand gestures are expressed. Similarly, in Europe, many of the movements are performed while standing, but the Japanese body is imbued with the custom of sitting. Thus Hata has devised ways to incorporate seated movements into the movements of eurythmy.

With the cultural discomfort<sup>8</sup> in implementing certain events and classroom practices of Steiner education in Japan and how these discomforts have been overcome as just described, next we would like to introduce some of the unique characteristics of Steiner school management in Japan.

### *“Hollow Structure”: Uniqueness in Operation*

One of the characteristics of Steiner schools in Japan is their unique form of management. Traditionally, Steiner schools are organised and managed by so-called colleges, with anthroposophists and other highly specialised educators. However, even after more than 30 years of development, colleges did not take root in Japan. They were too hierarchical. Mariko says the following about colleges:

There are schools that have colleges, but we don’t. There is a division of roles, but there are basically no meetings in Kyotanabe where if someone wants to go to that meeting for whatever reason, they are not allowed to go.

8 Mariko says that she has been intrigued by the simultaneous feeling of commonality and difference in the subject matter of her classes. It felt not so much like “discomfort” as “surprise and delight” at the coexistence of intercultural commonalities and local uniqueness (Electronic communication with Mariko, 28 December 2022).

So what is the actual situation in schools that are run in a unique way without colleges? Shigeo explains as follows:

The openness of our school was probably due to the fact that there was no top person above us. From the very beginning, there was an attitude that each member of the school would seek out and listen to what each person had to say to one another. In discussions, we listen thoroughly to opposing opinions, and we work to build consensus. In sum, we do not follow majority rule. In fact, we eliminated majority rule, but the decision was not unanimous! In the end, it seemed we were able to reach consensus on that. In sum, we listen to opinions of the other side and then listen to them again, [ . . . ] and as a result, we move forward together with the opposing opinions. Even those who oppose an idea can come to a curious agreement to work together, if we talk about it thoroughly. There have been many occasions involving such discussions when I have felt like I experienced the true meaning of democracy. Even though people were against a decision, they said they were willing to do it, that they understood. The genesis of that kind of ‘okay, let’s do it here and now’ feeling has occurred many times in the past 20-odd years, and in the end, this capacity provides a kind of richness as a movement. I think that the richness of the school is ultimately derived from that.

As just described, the *Kyotanabe Steiner School* does not have a highly specialised group called the college but rather a tried-and-tested, unique spirit of “consensus” that has continued uninterrupted.

Hata also has a similar feeling to this, referring to a system of management that could be called a “decentralised democracy.” In Japan, “instead of having a strong hierarchy when deciding things, [ . . . ] we leave it to the group. [ . . . ] I think it is important to create a way of sharing responsibility.” Hata calls this way of operating a “flat professional group,” which may be seen by European Steiner educators as immature because it is unclear whether it has a centre or not. However, Hata touts the positive value in this way of operating. In it, we find what the Japanese Jungian psychoanalyst Hayao Kawai calls the “hollow structure.” This is a mode of integration in which a clear centre is not established by logical consistency but in which the centre is nothing or empty. And when one places air at the centre, it is “a model that allows the coexistence of opposites” (Kawai, 1999). Such a structure is a “nucleus operated by people who will not exclude.”

While emphasising that Japan has the background to realise this ideal form of management, Hata also points out the weaknesses of this structure. In other words, “Hollow structures are vague, vague, vague, vague. And there is a great risk of the structure being taken over by something else.” Fully acknowledging this, she nonetheless states that even in Europe, “I think we can make a proposal to adopt, or at least recognise, this Japanese way of school management.”

### Disclosures That Bring Abundance to the Forest Periphery

We would like to conclude this chapter by discussing what the Japanese experience over the past 30 years or so suggests for the Steiner education movement, using the analogy of a forest. The peripheral areas of forests are usually lively. Whether in Germany or Japan, when you go deep into a forest, the foliage is dense. However, at the forest edges, as if in response to the sunlight, flowers bloom, butterflies dance, animals large and small gather, and you can see the bustle of life. By imitating the periphery of a forest with its open boundaries and the space and time for differing beings to meet and experience liveliness, educational movements may be able to avoid becoming like the closed atmosphere of a thick forest. As we have discussed, Steiner schools in Japan are comparatively open and lively in their operation. Although we may need a longer time to assess the outcomes, the network of *Sustainable Schools* mentioned in the first parts of this chapter is an example of the positive encounter of Steiner school practices on public education.

Here, I would like to call such a stance “openness.” Hata explains the importance of “emanating from what does not change, but changing what should change.” The unchanging things she refers to can be taken from the *Core Principles of Public Waldorf Education* formulated in 2014. The Core Principles, which are, so to speak, universal standards, specify the unique characteristics of Steiner education and are an essential standard of authenticity when building a Steiner school and when creating the curriculum. Hata’s translation of the Core Principles into Japanese for use in Japan is testimony to her recognition of their importance. However, Hata also tries to capture the essence of Steiner education in its practical dimension. For her, the universality of Steiner education can be found in “its stance towards the world and people.” Every morning in Japan, Steiner schools chant the “morning poem” in the classroom. This custom encourages sensing oneself as being connected to everything from the sun and stars to minerals, plants, and animals. The morning poem expresses the fundamental stance of Steiner education straightforwardly. While carefully protecting this core, Steiner schools open up to the outside world. This stance is important not only in the classroom but also in school management and the educational movement. This enables a richness to be brought to education in Japan, much like the periphery of a forest.

Hata says: “Japan has so much potential for the harmonious combination of Western and Eastern things to create new forms. [. . .] I think that is what we are aiming for in this small practice called Steiner education.” Obviously, the trap of dichotomous ways of thinking – Western and Eastern – must be avoided. However, as Hata says, new possibilities can only be opened up in the future if the strengths of both are brought together in harmony. If possibilities are suggested for the global Steiner education movement by the Steiner education movement in Japan, they may be in sharing how this harmonious integration is adding liveliness to the “forest periphery.”

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## 2 Waldorf Education in Israel

### Dazzling Success Amidst Resounding Failure

*Israel Koren*

#### Introduction

This article rests on insights gained over the course of the past 30 years in regard to the integration of Waldorf education within the Israeli public educational system and Israelis' exposure to Steiner's anthroposophic doctrine.<sup>1</sup> I would like to explore the way in which Waldorf education has become assimilated in Israel from two interrelated aspects: (1) outside-inwards – i.e., from the perspective of the public attracted by this form of education, the attitude of the educational establishment (the *Ministry of Education* and municipal authorities) towards it, and the media's relationship with it; and (2) inside-outwards – i.e. the attitude of those responsible for delivering Waldorf education (teachers, staff) and Israeli anthroposophists in general to Israel society, culture, public education, Judaism, and the Israeli Establishment (political affiliation). Some of the points raised only being touched on briefly, my focus will lie on the cultural and socio-economic context of the integration of Waldorf education within Israeli society and the Israeli public school framework.

Let me begin by acknowledging my ambivalence towards Waldorf education and Steiner's doctrine – particularly in light of the inseparable bond between the two. Rather than rejecting spirituality or religion on any principled grounds, I believe that any creed or world-view – secular, religious, or

1 "Anthroposophic education" is a well-known and widespread term in Israel. Anthroposophy in Israel is a very under-studied subject. For Kfar Raphael, an anthroposophic curative community in the Negev, awarded the Ben-Gurion Prize for its contribution to Israeli society in 2020, see Zander (2016). For the anthroposophic Kibbutz Harduf in the framework of a discussion of spiritual groups in the Galilee at the end of the 20th century, see Amram (2020, pp. 191–204). Linking these with the New Age movement in Israel, Amram examines whether they are cults, failing to observe (perhaps due to a lack of knowledge) the sexual abuse committed in the name of spiritual authority that occurred on the kibbutz, for which – on account of which several of the founding members, including the then leader, left. Lubelski's (2016) brief survey of the history of the theosophical and anthroposophical movements in Israel, the importing of the two doctrines into Israel by European Jewish immigrants, and their activity in Israel and attitude to Jews/Judaism are also of note. See also n. 9, 24.

scientific/academic – carries with it its own shadow. This must be examined and treated according to the characteristics of each individual phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, however, I am convinced that educational doctrines only function as a platform for grasping the essence of the “educational occurrence.” In light of my experience – both with Steiner’s teaching and its reception amongst his followers – I have increasingly come to recognise that education’s ultimate goal – in the sense of cultivating a person as an individual/member of society – is to encourage a common sense that enables one to distinguish between truth and falsehood/good and evil rather than spirituality, religiosity, occult sciences, inner experience, or faith.

Having elucidated (or at the very least stated) that I have no wish for Waldorf education to disappear, despite its problematic aspects, specifically in Israel (n. 2 and later in this chapter), and some unique problems that must be settled (but that may not be resolvable in light of the acute, fundamental mental issue of ideological “religious” closure), I would like to draw attention to two Hebrew works that highlight the positive dimensions of Waldorf education: Shimon Sachs’s *Cultivation of the Child’s Right Core in Light of the Anthroposophical Idea* (1984) and Judith Angress’s *Records from Waldorf Education: A pedagogic diary* (1990).<sup>3</sup> Gilad Goldshmidt’s writings on Waldorf education are also worthy of comment. A leader of Waldorf education and a senior anthroposophist in Israel, one of his contributions was published by Machon Mophet, an institute for the study and development of teaching-training in Israel. His *Waldorf Education: Theory and practice* (2021) has thus been reviewed as per academic custom.<sup>4</sup> Up until now, however, no Israeli scholars have discussed Waldorf education academically, Israeli anthroposophists similarly failing to address the critique of Steiner’s thought and educational philosophy seriously.<sup>5</sup>

2 My acquaintance with Steiner’s teaching goes back many years. I studied at the anthroposophic *Emerson College*, UK, for three years during the 1980s, gaining accreditation as a Waldorf teacher. Although I never desired to teach in Waldorf schools – partly because I am not a fan of doctrines – several of Steiner’s educational principles served me well as a high-school teacher. I support Waldorf education for younger ages (kindergartens and grades 1–4), believing it to afford a greater space for attentiveness and creativity than that provided by most other educational institutions of which I am aware.

3 A professor of special education at *Tel Aviv University*, Sachs also served as a special education inspector on behalf of the *Ministry of Education*. He became familiar with Waldorf education through his son, who studied in a Waldorf educational framework in Switzerland, then becoming a devotee. Judith Angress, whom I knew personally, was a teacher, educator, and teacher-training lecturer at a teacher-training college. She was first exposed to Waldorf education via her daughter Efrat – an artist (painter)/art teacher and resident of Kibbutz Harduf. Angress only had good things to say about Waldorf education.

4 As an anthroposophist investigating his own enterprise, I have some reservations regarding Goldshmidt – along the lines of the aphorism, “The baker does not attest to his own dough.” See n. 32.

5 The 2020 edition of the peer-reviewed *Be-ma’agalei Hinukh* (Educational Circles), published by *David Yellin College of Education*, was devoted to the centenary of the establishment of



As I was preparing this manuscript, I read Gish Amit's *Matriculation: A memoir* (2022) (Hebrew). Describing his career as a teacher and administrator in two schools – one for economic migrants and refugees/African asylum seekers, the other an anthroposophic school in greater Tel Aviv, where he served as principal. Much more reserved and critical of Waldorf education than Sachs, Angress, or Goldshmidt, Amit's varied, non-simplistic and in my view sober accounts are informed by a sense of self-criticism. While acknowledging that Waldorf education possesses some good elements, he notes that he was exposed to a

*hard utopia* with respect to individual development and the conditions a child requires; and not far behind, as is so frequently the case, anxiety over the loss of control and excessive authoritarianism. *This is the dark side of educational idealism.* [. . .] [S]omething has gone *irreparably wrong*.

(Amit, 2022, pp. 47, 76 [my italics])<sup>6</sup>

Amit appears to be referring to a type of religiosity that, while ostensibly supporting education, actually impinges upon it. I shall cite Amit throughout this article, as well as incorporating several anecdotes into my observations. Finally, I shall offer some generalisations, while reminding the reader that “every rule has exception(s).”

### Spread of Waldorf Education in Israel

Waldorf education first became a feature of the Israeli educational scene during the 1990s, when it was espoused and made part of the public state educational system. Waldorf kindergartens and schools spread like mushrooms, including non-anthroposophic kindergartens governed by anthroposophic

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Waldorf education, the articles therein being contributed by anthroposophists and/or Steinerian scholars. While *David Yellin* is an academic institution, the anthroposophic teacher-training track in which I taught did not relate to works dealing with Steiner's thought not written by anthroposophists – not to speak of the critical academic literature on his philosophy and views on education. Cf. Jost Schieren's (2015) article, published in the anthroposophic journal, however, which directly addresses the criticism of Waldorf education.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to numerous misgivings based on descriptions that, like Amit, I find disturbing (see the following quote), Amit also remarks favourably that “Reading Sachs is a much-needed reminder of the beauty and originality of Waldorf education” (Schieren, 2015, p. 76). Cf., on the other hand, his remarks regarding Waldorf education's attitude towards technology: “We must understand the virtually total absence of computers in school and the prohibition against the use of mobile phones not necessarily as conservatism but rather as a form of social differentiation – that is, elitism. It is also a demand for proper living that stands in opposition to the masses, who spend their days in blank, absent-minded staring, TikTok, and social networks” (Schieren, 2015, pp. 55–56).

principles.<sup>7</sup> To these we may add the kindergarten/school teacher-training tracks in institutes of higher learning and further training courses. This rapid development has occurred without any real – or at least significant – need for publicity or marketing. Families are on the waiting list for Waldorf schools, pleading for their children to be accepted. Some even change residence so that their school-agers can attend local anthroposophic institutions; others are looking for an alternative for pupils who fail to integrate into “normal” schools. Waldorf educational frameworks are free to admit whom they choose, conditioning acceptance upon prior enrolment in private Waldorf kindergartens (illicitly). Unlike their public counterparts, they are non-subsidised fee-paying institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Waldorf education has thus become a “brand” in Israel, permeating public consciousness and even finding its way into the popular satirical TV show *Eretz Nehederet* [A Wonderful Country]. At first glance, it appears to be an unqualified success story, with the facts speaking for themselves and part of the public attracted to the Waldorf educational system having had their say.<sup>9</sup> I would like to pour some cool water on this enthusiasm. In my opinion, Waldorf education has prospered in Israel because of deep problems in Israeli society, culture, and education – the mediocre level of the Israeli educational system, cultural and social polarity, a cultural vacuum reflected in the education system and its graduates, educational inequality, a poor political culture, governmental/municipal void (known as “absence of governance”), and injustice/corruption (frequently governmental/municipal).<sup>10</sup> I thus submit that the spread/gains of Waldorf education in Israel are the outcome of a series

7 According to Hahn and Beckman (2020, p. 2), while anthroposophic education has spread across the globe, it is particularly prominent in Israel.

8 The average brutto salary in Israel at the beginning of 2023 was 11,730 NIS (new Israeli shekel, approximately 3,000 €). In most middle-class families, both partners work. Waldorf kindergartens cost between 2,700 NIS (ca. 670 €) and 4,000 NIS (ca. 995 €) per month.

9 “Around 150 kindergartens, over 30 elementary schools, 8 high schools, and six teacher-training institutions – two of which are academic” (Goldshmidt, 2021, p. 6). Lubelski (2016, pp. 135, 147) reports 8,000 pupils enrolled in Waldorf schools in Israel and around 2,000 graduates who participate in anthroposophic seminars or activities. He nonetheless believes the two movements to only have a minimal influence on Israeli society.

10 The mediocrity and greyness of the state educational system in Israel is a frequent subject of discussion in the media. In a broader context and in response to its negative image, the flourishing of Waldorf schools forms part of a wider trend – namely, the success of alternative education, the most prominent of which are democratic and Montessori education. Around 30 democratic schools exist, along with 150 Montessori schools and 20 kindergarten. On the positive side, this circumstance is prompting “ordinary” state schools to reinvent themselves.

Anecdote: Last *Independence Day* (2023), all the schools in Kiryat Tivon, where I live, prepared a presentation showcasing their distinctive characteristics – a lot of nature, self-study, and computers. Conspicuous for its absence in every case was the use of textbooks – which appear to be much more boring than the lived experience that all the schools (including Waldorf) promote.

of vacuums – the search for quick and easy solutions to acute problems that embodies a loss of direction.<sup>11</sup>

#### Four “Tribes” of Israeli Society and Waldorf Education’s Target Population

In 2015, Reuben Rivlin, the then President of Israel, delivered what has come to be known as the “tribes speech.” Herein, he noted that, in contrast to the past, when it was possible to speak of mainstream society vs. minority sectors in Israel, four “tribes” can now be identified – the secular, national-religious (Modern Orthodox), Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi), and Arab sectors.<sup>12</sup>

Although this is a generalisation, Israelis know to whom and what the terms refer.<sup>13</sup> As reflected in their views on the state-religion question (Israel

11 The cultural vacuum (or crisis) in the Israeli education system is a topic that has been discussed in Israel many times throughout the years and from diverse aspects. I will mention here the article *Soul and spirit in education* (from 1939) (in Y. Rot [ed.], *On the Hebrew high school education in Israel* [1946] (pp. 145–274). Reuven Mas (in Hebrew) by the biblical scholar and philosopher Yehezkel Kaufmann, who had already warned before the establishment of the state of Israel about the preference for inner experience (the emotional “soul” level) learning in schools at the expense of the permanent and enduring values/ideals of culture (which he called “spirit”); this issue is no less relevant nowadays (see the anecdote in n. 10). A treatise by the philosopher and education scholar Ernst Akiva Simon (1982) *Sparta or Athens – Fundamental problems of military education* (in his book *Are We Still Jews?*). Sifriyat Poalim (in Hebrew) warns against the excessive place given in the Israeli education system to the militaristic ideal (“Sparta”) at the expense of the ideals of reason and justice (“Athens”). In both articles, the authors link their arguments to the causes for the rise of the Nazi regime. Worth noting are the national conference of the kibbutzim seminar called *Restoring Spirit and Culture in Education* (2007) and the published articles of the conference (2008), as well as the 2012 *Mophet Institute* publication called *The Human Spirit in Education*, dedicated precisely to this topic: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230806174214/www.smkb.ac.il/units-and-departments/advanced-education/publications/bilingual-articles/volume3/> (memento from 6 August 2023); <https://web.archive.org/web/20230806174523/https://ebook.macam.ac.il/read/6/bitaon49#1> (memento from 6 August 2023) (both in Hebrew). I will also mention the “*Meaningful Learning*” *Reform/Program in the Education System* (2014) during the short term of Shai Piron as Minister of Education (2012–2014), which was not implemented: <https://edu.gov.il/heb/programs/general-programs/Pages/significant-learning.aspx> (memento from 11 July 2023) (in Hebrew). Last and not least, the ongoing Humanities crisis in the Israeli academy, including teacher training institutions, which has far-reaching consequences: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230806175119/www.academy.ac.il/Index3/Entry.aspx?nodeId=769&entryId=18782> (memento from August 6 2023). I don’t see how the anthroposophic education system in Israel can contribute to the overcoming of that cultural crisis.

12 Three of the four have their own public educational system, each receiving dedicated funding from the *Ministry of Education*. The secular (including the traditional non-religious, and non-Jewish) attend public non-religious schools, and the national-religious have their own schools – as do the Ultra-Orthodox (albeit very loosely monitored).

13 *Reichman University* adopted Rivlin’s division of Israeli society into four sectors, meeting the challenge he posed. In 1917, the *Institute for Policy and Strategy* (IPS) presented a report on her behalf to the president entitled *The New Israeli Order: A Vision for Reality*, also publishing a collection of articles under the title *Common Israeliness*: <https://web.archive.org/>

is defined as both Jewish and democratic [or the reverse]), the sectors are culturally isolated. The divide between them is not easy to bridge, their differences most often being more conspicuous than their similarities.<sup>14</sup>

For our present purposes, Waldorf education in Israel looks primarily towards the “secular” sector. While varied and not necessarily atheistic, this is “non-religious” in the sense that its members do not place Judaism in the centre of their lives or follow Jewish law (*halakhah*), their attitude towards Judaism ranging from affinity and identification to antagonism and outright rejection. This alienation and hostility derive historically from their forefathers, who rebelled against their religious upbringing and religion in general in the name of the secular ideals of the Enlightenment – including the separation of state and religion.<sup>15</sup> While the present religious sectors also contribute to the critical and anti-religious attitude of this public, some of the polemics are legitimate – i.e., derive from divergent world-views and priorities. These are supplemented by bilateral negative stereotypes based, inter alia, on ignorance. Many Ultra-Orthodox view secular Israeli society and culture, for example, as an “empty wagon” without roots or loyalty to the Jewish people and their heritage.

Generally speaking, the Jewish/Judaic knowledge of the “secular” sector is rather weak, resting primarily on the media and secondary literature. Although Israel defines itself as Jewish and democratic, and even though the *Ministry of Education* regards itself as equipping pupils not only with learning skills but also with education and Jewish values/culture, a significant number of state school pupils – the largest educational stream – barely study Judaism in school (or take very few courses in the subject). In line with the scholarly distinction between Bible and Judaism as separate disciplines, the majority of “secular” pupils are primarily exposed to the Hebrew Bible rather than Judaism as a whole.<sup>16</sup> This knowledge being inef-

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web/20230806175605/www.runi.ac.il/research-institutes/government/ips/activities/4tribes (memento from 6 August 2023). The Covid-19 outbreak re-exposed the deep rift between the tribes; however, some of them simply ignored the *Health Ministry*'s instructions/guidelines, the current political judicial reform crisis – designed to limit the power of the Supreme Court, which its detractors refer to as the “judicial revolution” – turning everything upside down and both revealing and exacerbating the profound split within the public.

- 14 Two of the four – the Ultra-Orthodox and Arabs – do not identify themselves as Zionists. Israeli society is thus split and conflict-ridden – even before we take the Israeli–Palestinian issue and other external threats into consideration. Rivlin did not deliver his “tribes speech” as a sociologist, of course, the issue troubling him (and others) being whether/how the social/civil sectorial gaps in Israeli society can be bridged. This question and the conclusions drawn from it have far-reaching implications for all the citizens of Israel – and the future of the State.
- 15 See Dinur's (2014) brief survey of the religio-cultural complexities associated with the encounter between Jews/Judaism and the alternatives along the axis of maintaining Jewish identity and rejecting Judaism in the name of Israelism.
- 16 The *Shenhar Committee* appointed in 1994 by then Minister of Education Zevulun Hammer to investigate the study of Judaism within the state educational system recommended

fective in cultural terms, they are barely capable of reading Jewish sources, including the Bible. The “cultural vacuum” this creates originates in the Israeli education system. Having long existed, it also includes the parents of the young studying today.<sup>17</sup>

These comments are not intended to privilege the other educational streams in Israel, which have their own blind spots and issues (as noted previously, every phenomenon has its shadowy side). Rather, I wish to lead us to the “connection point” between some in the “secular” sector (to which anthroposophists belong) and Waldorf education/anthroposophy. Members of this sector demonstrate a very limited ability or desire to understand Steiner’s doctrine and his educational principles in their broad and laden contexts – historical, religious, philosophical, metaphysical, and scientific.<sup>18</sup>

Socially and socio-economically, the “secular” sector forms part of the Israeli middle class that emerged with the influx of European Jewish immigrants before, during, and after the two World Wars. Those who came from Arab lands – known in Israel as Sephardim or Mizrahim – were (and still are) far more traditional in contrast.<sup>19</sup> As we have already noted, Israeli anthroposophists belong to the former class. This sector – to which I belong in a certain sense – is also economically diverse, including some who struggle to make ends meet due to the ongoing erosion of the middle class, some who are fairly comfortably well off, and some who are well established (e.g. those in hi tech).<sup>20</sup> Most of the teachers in public state schools also belong to this sector.

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the promotion of Jewish education in a humanist/pluralistic spirit via tailored curricula to be known as “Jewish-Israeli Culture.” These were only implemented years later, up until now the majority of the teachers having no formal training (BA) for teaching it: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200722145728/https://www.hiloni.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/%D7%93%D7%95%D7%97-%D7%A2%D7%9D-%D7%95%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%9D-%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%94%D7%A8.pdf> <https://web.archive.org/web/20230608111617/https://www.taubcenter.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Education-Overview-HEB-2022.pdf> (mementos from 22 July 2020 and 8 June 2023). On the relatively low level of basic skills in Israeli schools, including literacy skills (compared to other countries in the OECD), see for example the *Institute for Social-Economic Research* (Shoresh) report from 2021: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230806184603/https://shoresh.institute/archive.php?src=shoresh.institute&f=ShoreshHandbook2021-Educ-Heb.pdf> (memento from 2023, August 6).

17 In an early conference on teaching Bible in schools, one of the participants remarked that if Bible is not a mandatory subject in non-religious Israeli schools, it will also disappear from Israeli universities.

18 Puzzled by the absence of any historical or comparative perspective in anthroposophic seminars, he talked to a friend whose son was in a Waldorf school in another city. “The friend observed: ‘The refusal isn’t coincidental. An historical context would take much of the air out of the anthroposophical balloon. . . . If we understand anthroposophy as a religion, nothing’s strange or surprising anymore.’” (Amit, 2022, p. 57).

19 For the traditionalist Sephardi stream, see, for example, Buzaglo (2003).

20 Anecdote: Several months ago, an ad in a paper for an upscale residential project in the centre of Tel Aviv announced that the roof would be used for family activities – including an anthroposophic workshop.

Some “secularists” are further drawn to New Age types of Western spirituality and their cultural and practical aspects – including holistic and communal education.<sup>21</sup> Like anthroposophy, the New Age movement is an “alternative religion” or “religion after religion.” Steiner’s views on education and other matters can readily be incorporated into New Age cultural and spiritual pluralism.

Generally speaking, the “secular” sector privileges the universal over the particular, regarding the latter as culturally broad and morally superior. This public thus inclines towards progressive Western ideas, including modern Western individualism – which it views as universal. To this we may add a proclivity for European manners and restraint that contrasts with the rough directness of Israelis and desire for a good standard of living, consumer culture, and the abundance of North America. While this sector is not very tolerant (at best) of the two religious “tribes,” it makes a boast of accepting Israeli Arabs, its members representing themselves as cultured and humane and devoid of racism.<sup>22</sup>

This discussion clearly evinces that the “secular” sector identifies politically with the centre-left.<sup>23</sup> Most are non-right – i.e. not Likud or the religious parties, Likudniks being primarily (but not exclusively) Mizrahim. Despite the high rate of “mixed marriages,” sectarian tension still exists between Ashkenazim and Sephardim/Mizrahim in Israeli politics, Sephardim also forming part of the Israeli middle class. Some politicians are at pains to reignite the rupture, with media personnel and celebrities also weighing in on both sides.

Anthroposophists, Waldorf educators, and the families whose children attend Waldorf schools thus overwhelmingly belong to the “secular” sector – which, as we have noted, also contains non-atheistic members.<sup>24</sup> Steiner’s universalism and championing of individualism vs. national, racial, or

21 E.g. courses and workshops, nutritional awareness (organic food), environmental/alternative-medicine consciousness, etc. This spirituality replaces study in the Humanities faculties of universities (“the Humanities crisis”).

22 Anecdote: As a student at the *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*, I took a course on particularism and universalism in modern Jewish thought in which the lecturer recounted a story about someone who espoused universalistic views but could not stand the person living opposite him. In a topical context, we may note several cases in which new members of communal settlements affiliated with this sector in undergo a screening process, refused to accept Arab citizens on the grounds of cultural difference and socio-economic gaps (never racism!).

23 The “centre” in Israel is rather blurred, more readily being defined by what it is not (not left extremists).

24 In the latest Knesset election (November 2022), the statistics for Kibbutz Harduf were as follows: Meretz (far left; did not pass the electoral threshold): 41%; Labor under Meirav Michaeli (left): 14%; Yesh Atid under Yair Lapid (centre): 25%; Hamahaneh ha-mamlakhti under Benny Ganz (centre): 4%; Likud (the largest rightist party, under Netanyahu): 1.3%. The centre/left thus gained 84% of all the Kibbutz votes. The editor of *Adam Olam*, the Israeli anthroposophist magazine, himself observed that the majority of the families who send their children to Waldorf schools incline to the political left due to their humanistic outlook (Lubelski, 2016, p. 148).

religious affiliation form important points of contact with the Israeli centre-left.<sup>25</sup> The word “religion” serves as a red flag both for those enrolled in its educational system and for those who have reservations about it.

### Anti-Semitism and Racism in Steiner’s Thought

The laughter of fate or the karma in which anthroposophists believe! For over 20 years, Europeans and Americans have known that Steiner not only disseminated universal ideas and denounced racism and anti-Semitism as a manifestation of racism but also propounded extreme racist and anti-Semitic views. Since then, a fierce polemic has raged between Steiner’s followers, who reject such claims or seek to mitigate their force, and his critics.<sup>26</sup> Waldorf schools in Israel neither disseminate anti-Semitic or racist ideas nor note that Steiner held such views. When asked, they deny any anti-Semitic/racist Steinerian statements or explain them (away) as infelicitous utterances or slips of the tongue. They thus continue the tradition of concealment, rebuttal, and disinformation they themselves received, having much to lose with regard to the valuable aspects of Steiner’s thought and educational philosophy.

Echoes of this controversy (the latest wave of which occurred in 2021 in Germany and included an article in *Der Spiegel* on anti-Semitism in Steiner/Waldorf schools in Germany) have also reached Israel. However, neither the Israeli media nor the Israeli establishment have ever conducted a thoroughgoing (or even summary) investigation into the diverse aspects of Steiner’s thought or educational philosophy – or its distinctive cultural links with the State of Israel. Such an inquiry would also need to examine Steiner’s attitude towards the Jews and the ideological and concrete associations between anthroposophy/Waldorf and Nazism/the Nazi regime.<sup>27</sup> I have referred to this as a “cultural vacuum.”

Despite its attempts to commemorate the Holocaust in curricula, ceremonies, and trips to concentration camps, the Israeli *Ministry of Education* has exhibited little interest in the matter. It likewise seems unbothered by the

25 The Jerusalem anthroposophical association responsible for Waldorf schools and kindergartens is thus known as *Amutat Adam* [The Human Being Association] – human being and not “national.” Nationality, being merely a mode of expression of the universal “I” common to all people, must be superseded and even abandoned so that free “I”s can return to correct it.

26 For the developmental stages of Steiner’s racist doctrines, see Martins (2012, pp. 292–341). For the response/memorandum by the *Goetheanum* in Switzerland (translated into Hebrew shortly after its publication and pure propaganda in my opinion), see Selg et al. (2021).

Anecdote: For a discussion of the current polemic, see Koren (2022).

27 For the three stages of Steiner’s treatment of the “Jewish question,” see Staudenmaier (2005). For the complex links between anthroposophy/Waldorf and Nazism, see Staudenmaier (2014). Like most anthroposophists around the world, who remain in a stage of denial based on Steiner’s renunciation of racism and anti-Semitism, Israeli anthroposophists all come to Steiner’s defence, being particularly upset by Jewish racism. This may be preceded by an incapacity to understand or accept that Steiner was a complex, capricious thinker.



fact that teaching-training colleges disseminate misleading information about Steiner's doctrine and the history of the anthroposophic movement after his death. It similarly appears untroubled by the absence of any critical scholarly literature in the teaching of anthroposophic principles in colleges of education in Israel (instruction that includes an introduction to Steiner's philosophy). These courses thus rest primarily on anthroposophic writings rather than on sober, academic sources. Academia thus demonstrates that its Humanities research is irrelevant, its content determined by profit and loss and public opinion.

### Waldorf Education, "Ordinary" Education, and Parental Fees

What do parents look for when they send their children to anthroposophic Waldorf schools? Affirming what I have said herein, Amit notes that those who are attracted to Waldorf education are a homogeneous group, elaborating: "Parents do not send their children to us because they are close to anthroposophy or its notion of childhood but because they do not want to send them to a conventional school" (Amit, 2022, p. 120). To the best of my knowledge, this is only partially true – in his school, perhaps. As previously noted, I believe that a significant number of parents send their children to Waldorf schools because they are drawn by their educational principles and anthroposophy in general – including either an explicit or implicit proclivity towards "New Age" ideals and a supportive, holistic education system.

Why are parents hesitant about "ordinary" schools, and what do they think Waldorf education will provide that the public Israeli school system does not? As one who belongs to the beleaguered latter and regularly critiques it, I think that a large measure of the mass criticism should be directed historically towards the Israeli leadership. To a great extent, this mirrors Israeli society as a whole rather than being an alien creature. The Israeli education system has been neglected for decades. Even when allocated a generous budget (the *Ministry of Education* is government funded), it has not significantly improved – due to incompetence, inconsistency, and political factors.<sup>28</sup> Despite these circumstances, I believe that the education system is mediocre and grey rather than poor. The teaching level is certainly substandard in light

28 Two examples: (1) Since 2000, Israel has had 13 Ministers of Education, some of whom served very brief terms. Only three had direct connections with the field of education. Those who did not were appointed solely on coalition considerations. Some regarded their post as a stepping stone to a more prominent cabinet position. They all had divergent educational and political agendas, some promoting useless ideas. (2) The teacher-training colleges primarily responsible for training teachers have been financially drained over the past 20 years due to their large number – some having been established for political reasons and being unnecessary and "unfounded." They have thus suffered from financial pressure to unite – a move that has borne no fruit to date and has led to economic depletion. In practice, this circumstance finds form in a significant gap between the standards of past and present students.



of the educational and cultural challenges Israel faces – polarity, vulgarisation, and ignorance. This is a generalisation, of course; many good things are happening and good teachers obviously exist.<sup>29</sup> It is also a question of educational goals – a controversial subject.

My opinion that the Israeli education system is mediocre is due to the fact that it allows pupils to use it as a way station towards higher education (if they are actually interested in learning – not a given). Frequently, the school and learning climate prevents pupils from gaining a good education.<sup>30</sup> I do not consider the Israeli education system to be good because its graduates leave with low levels of cultural knowledge and understanding.

As noted previously, this state further perpetuates ideological gaps and socio-political tension within Israel. Over the past decade, this situation has been compounded by literacy issues (which I also see in my teacher-training college) – language skills, writing, and textual understanding. This is also true of the middle class, who perceive themselves as cultured. Once known as the “people of the book” and for years having daily papers and a strong media presence, Israelis are now becoming a people of the social media, apps, and mall and internet shoppers. With us, everything is extreme.<sup>31</sup>

As their poor results in national exams evince, however, Waldorf schools also have their literacy issues.<sup>32</sup> Like anthroposophists in general, Israeli Waldorf

29 In 2022, the *Mophet Institute* (p. 12) published an article by Nahum Blass entitled *The Achievements of the Israeli Education System: A Meta-View*. The *Education Policy Program Chair* at the *Taub Center for Social Policy Studies* in Israel, Blass argued that, contra the poor image of the state education system prevalent amongst Israelis, in relation to earlier periods, it had improved significantly – and certainly was not on the decline: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230806190849/www.taubcenter.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Education-Overview-HEB-2022.pdf> (memento from 6 August 2023).

30 Anecdote: An investigative report into the public learning environment broadcast on an Israeli television channel in 2022 filmed several parents attempting to teach in areas in which they had some expertise. They were virtually silenced, the pupils not giving them a chance to speak. Teachers without strong characters or exceptional abilities find class teaching very difficult. This is a well-known problem I have frequently encountered in schools. While it also exists in Waldorf institutions, it may be less acute therein. School violence is a further step in the wrong direction. I was surprised to read Amit’s observations about violence in the Waldorf school of which he was principal. I have been told, however, that the situation is different at least with regard to another Waldorf school, no violence occurring therein.

31 Benstein (2005/2006, pp. 142–147). Anecdote: Several years ago, I used to visit my parents – who lived far from me – on the Sabbath. On my way, I passed a kibbutz in the centre of the country near which a mall had been erected. I was startled by the number of cars parked outside, wondering whether these shopping centres – whose status as a place of entertainment for the middle class beats me – have become the modern replacement for pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. During a short stay in the United States, I was likewise surprised to see that the malls there were much “calmer.” We are a people of “religious” extremism even when secular!

32 Some years ago, Gilad Goldshmidt remarked, in an interview with a local newspaper that had reported the poor exam results in Kibbutz Harduf, that he was not worried because the pupils were developing other skills. In my view, we should be concerned by his lack of concern.

teachers are the product of the Israeli education system. Most thus also lack the cultural knowledge and understanding that is gained over years through great effort. The problem from which they and the whole sector to which they belong (and others) suffer can be summed up in the term “hermeneutics” – reading/comprehension skills and the possibility of drawing insights from them from diverse perspectives, including critical thought. I encounter this issue time and again at the college and amongst my acquaintances.

Like the “secular” sector in general, anthroposophists’ knowledge of Jewish heritage is very weak, largely resting on Steiner’s interpretation of the Bible and Judaism.<sup>33</sup> As previously noted and discussed in the fourth section of my book on *Judaism and Anthroposophy*, this is unfounded. In light of the Israeli left’s objections to Judaism, I refer to Israeli anthroposophists as the “metaphysical left.”<sup>34</sup> Their general theoretical training is also generally poor. Is it not a false wish or imagination to assume that studying Steiner’s thought and educational theory could gain them a high level of cultural understanding as though by magic?

Knowledge and modes of internalisation are not the only important elements of education, however. During my stint in the teaching-training track for Waldorf teachers/kindergarten teachers at *David Yellin College of Education* in Jerusalem (2008–2011), I observed the disparities and similarities between this and other tracks in Oranim, where I was then teaching. Alongside the “chronic” problems of learning culture and the limited investment characteristic of every institution, I found some of the anthroposophic students to be serious, seeking meaning in their lives.<sup>35</sup> As a rough guess, they constituted approximately a third of the student population – a not inconsiderable number. This is a significant opening point that should not be dismissed. My only comparison was with students with a similar mentality in my field (Jewish Studies – a relatively complex discipline within the Humanities) and those in tracks for turning academics into teaching faculty (students in their thirties and forties with lengthy work and life experience who know what they want from themselves).

33 This can easily be proven from the two sheets assigned to Judaism in the Israeli anthroposophical magazine *Adam Olam* in 2015 and 2020. This is an issue I cannot elaborate on here.

34 Some years ago, an Israeli anthroposophist responded to the charges of anti-Semitism and racism in Steiner’s thought by calling those who made them the “abstract left” – i.e. cut off from reality and thus critical of anthroposophy. This is one way to rebut the left’s criticism of Steiner’s right-wing nationalist/racist views.

35 Anecdote from when I was teaching in the anthroposophic track: While most of the faculty were very welcoming, not exhibiting any exaggerated sense of self-esteem, I once went with some students to a voluntary kabbalistic meditative evening in the north of Israel in their and my free time and on our own initiative. When the other teachers heard about this, one of them told me it was part of the anthroposophic track – i.e. anthroposophic rather than Jewish. I refrained from reminding her, in turn, that they were all teaching in a Hebrew college – due, inter alia, to its pluralistic approach.

What precisely do parents look for from Waldorf schools, then? Certainly the serious, high-quality teachers of the Type I encountered in the anthroposophic track. The problem is that such staff, who lack cultural knowledge and a critical perspective, easily become ideologically rigid, like the shadow that pervades the “idea” – particularly a doctrine such as Steiner’s (as with any spiritual or religious phenomenon resting on revelatory claims) that champions absolute (vs. abstract hypothesis) truths in the name of the spirit. Here, a teaching that declares itself to be universal quickly becomes provincial, unilateral, and oppositional.

Parents also expect a supportive and protective environment – which they think they will not find in “ordinary” schools and consider more important than learning skills and preparation for higher education. They want their children to be cared for gently, Israeli society at large being marked by violence and vulgarity. As with other alternative forms of education, parents seek a more “sterile” framework in Waldorf schools. Being not just worried but acutely anxious over their children’s welfare and well-being, they are willing to make financial sacrifices and investments to calm their fears, paying for what they could get for free.<sup>36</sup>

This presentation of the situation is nevertheless somewhat “laundered.” In less abrasive language, parents who send their children to Waldorf schools are in search of an environment free of what Israelis have long referred to as the “second Israel” – or in more contemporary slang, the “ugly Israeli.”<sup>37</sup> With respect to “New Age” spirituality, young and less young mothers in particular, whose partners follow them (quasi-)voluntarily, are impressed by the aesthetics, calm culture, and promise of harmonious education that Waldorf schooling holds out for a balanced product in the future. This romanticisation of Waldorf education has something of a “pose” about it: end-of-term performances in anthroposophic schools serve as shop windows. Despite representing the pupils’ high achievements, these festive events may cover up poor learning processes and/or hide other serious problems, such as closedness and rigidity.<sup>38</sup> This aspect of the system rarely garners the same attention as others.

36 In practice, the *Ministry of Education* permits the imposition of extra costs for such things as trips, field courses, events linked to the holy days, and end-of-year celebrations. While these largely remain relatively low, some schools nevertheless find ways to circumvent the restrictions. The monitoring of these funds is lax, with both the *Ministry of Education* and municipal authorities turning a blind eye.

37 These are the Israelis who litter, disturb passengers on flights and in hotels, and speed on the road. While the centre-left regards itself as (Western) cultured and is quite happy with that status, some of the younger generation in this sector behave wildly at nature- and end-of-year school parties, using alcohol and drugs.

38 By “pose,” I also mean that terms such as “the child,” “development,” “process” carry a distinctive meaning that borders on the sacred, as well as the mode of speech of Waldorf teachers, which can be identified from a great distance.

Ideological impermeability and hardness can also be a type of bellicosity directed towards “evil” and the “evildoer.”<sup>39</sup> Outward aggression is not the only form of violence. When problems or controversies arise between teachers and parents over educational or financial matters, bilateral “demons” that have been repressed can let the genie out of the lamp. Like a spiritual team of teachers, civilised parents, so it turns out, are not necessarily as correct(ed) as they initially appear to be. Some parents in Waldorf schools are so loyal to Waldorf education that they become antagonistic towards those who are less “orthodox” (in the sense of believing the right thing).<sup>40</sup> They may thus be no less “religiously orthodox” than some of the teachers – a non-homogeneous faculty because some espouse Steiner’s doctrine only partially or not at all, having merely been trained in an anthroposophic institution as Waldorf teachers. Even in a post-religious era, people appear to need religion.

If parents who send their children to Waldorf schools are also in search of an environment free of the “second Israel,” how does the filtering that distinguishes between “sacred” and “profane,” between cultured and vulgar Israel, take place – a filtering that enables a holistic environment? One answer lies in the inherent nature of Waldorf education. There is another, however – namely, parental expenses. As we have already remarked, these start in private Waldorf kindergartens, the prerequisite for advancing to

39 Anecdote: I recently lectured to a group of (centre-left) Israelis belonging to the New Israeli Jungian Association on Steinerian interfaces between the body, soul, and spirit, thinking this subject would interest them. Although I did not critique Steiner in any way, some of his views upset a number in the audience, perhaps because I also quoted his criticism of Jung. The lecture thus slid into a discussion of Waldorf education – in which framework, it transpired, some of their grandchildren were being taught. Critical voices were raised against its hard-line idealism, including objections to the prohibition against painting in black and high parental expenses (see later in this chapter). Although I spared them a citation of the link Steiner makes between black (lack of life and egoism) and his views on black-skinned people, I told them what those who wish not to be identified with the “second Israel” and who are ready to pay a lot for the privilege are likely to receive. One of the groups noted in favour of Waldorf education that it exhibits much greater concern for its pupils than “ordinary” schools do. At the end of the lecture, someone else came up to me and said that when he had worked as an inspector in the *Ministry of Education* and sought to obligate parents to send their children to Waldorf schools at the age required by law (rather than that recommended by the anthroposophic system itself), some paid psychologists to testify that their children were not yet ready for a school framework.

40 “Another meeting with the parent council. Again, grievances against Waldorf are expressed, this time due to the decision to change the Grade 8 performance – instead of a Shakespeare play, as per traditional custom, it was decided to present songs and declamations. Although the class teacher was one of the founders of the school and a senior lecturer in the anthroposophic teacher-training college, the parent council members (I suspect they represent a negligible, albeit vocal, minority of the parents) are disturbed. In their view, this is an additional link in the chain of calamities that has befallen the school, leading to its inevitable collapse as a Waldorf educational institution. In my eyes, all this is so ridiculous as to be absurd. The fear of change, the terrified clinging to lines, an opaque, almost religious, orthodoxy” (Amit, 2022, p. 116).

Waldorf schools. They then continue in fees that are significantly higher than public schools, including the extra costs we have noted.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to observe that the Waldorf education system does not involve additional high expenses because it seeks to filter the pupils who apply for admission. It adopts this approach because it thinks it is more deserving – whether due to its high self-esteem, the staff’s belief that they invest/work harder than others, or the argument of economic justice. The Waldorf school is thus – although not only for these reasons – regarded as privileged, encountering hostility from time to time from “ordinary” schools, as has happened on several occasions when anthroposophic and “ordinary” schools were integrated under a single rubric.

Anthroposophic tuition fees mean that this form of education is not “fair play.” It must be positioned not only in accordance with its own value and success but also in relation to its selection system (as we have seen, private Waldorf kindergarten involve fees and extra school costs). Parents are willing to accept this situation, either because they do not understand that it is unfair or because they themselves have an interest in a filtered system. This is all in addition to their estimation that, as part of the school climate, the teachers and administration are better – a circumstance for which they are willing to pay.<sup>42</sup>

With respect to fees in Waldorf schools in Israel, we must also note that, to the best of my knowledge, this is a form of originality even according to Israeli standards. Alongside the teachers’ salary table – determined periodically by State institutions in liaison with the two teachers’ organisations – Waldorf schools have set up associations that collect parental fees in addition to salaries. Teachers thus have two sources of income: one from the State and from the association (including pension provisions and additional benefits). Ostensibly, these are fees to cover the special expenses justified by the schools –

41 The cost of anthroposophical education (like all forms of subsidised alternative schools) can reach 1,000 NIS (new Israeli shekel) a month (ca. \$250/230 €), the law also allows the same amount to be collected as an additional payment annually. Very few private schools exist in Israel that are not funded by the State and not attended by the rich. If Waldorf schools were to become private – the right move ideologically and educationally, in my view – they would lose a substantial number of their students, the middle class not being able to afford the high fees, especially when several children are in the family.

42 Amit describes the parent council’s desire to pay to find a head to replace him after he announced his resignation – i.e. not directly (and without any cost) through the *Ministry of Education*: “I meet with the head of the parent council and raise my reservations with him. He says: ‘I can’t play with the school’s future. That’s true: I have the economic resources to provide a proper education but I work hard to achieve that; I haven’t stolen from anyone’. He says: ‘If I was content with mediocre heads I would send my daughter to an ordinary school’. He says: ‘Yes, obviously public schooling should be better, and of course all heads should be excellent. But as long as the State doesn’t fulfil its commitments towards its citizens, we have no choice but to take care of ourselves’. Two days later, I write the parent council: ‘It’s not right that a public school should pay to find a head. Precisely because we have extra resources we must use them wisely and accountably’” (Amit, 2022, p. 127).

cultivation of the arts or the necessity of having two teachers in the classroom. In practice, however, they form an illicit teacher bonus.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the *Ministry of Education*, the municipal authorities are in close proximity to the schools within their districts. Although each has an education department, here too we find people turning blind eyes. These bodies seek to attract an established and high-quality populace and show off the educational initiatives in their field. The present situation is also beneficial in terms of municipal taxes. Why rouse sleeping dragons?

### Anthroposophy, Christianity, and Judaism

Noting the polemic over the presence of racist and anti-Semitic elements in Steiner's thought, I contend that they cannot but have an effect on culture and education in the State of Israel. This not being the place to discuss the issue in detail here, I shall suffice with a number of questions/problems. As early as 1888, Steiner asserted that the continued existence of Jews/Judaism was a historical error (Steiner, 1971, p. 152).<sup>44</sup> He repeated the same claim in his autobiography, written at the end of his life. In 1897, he spoke out against the Zionist movement in the name of universalism, further representing the Jews as a degenerate people/race on several occasions during the First World War.

The first question here is: where does Waldorf education stand within the public education system in Israel when these are its founder's views on Jews and Zionism? I have no answer to this conundrum, only noting that no one asks the question in any institutional or cultural body in Israel. The second question is: what do anthroposophists think about Steiner's teaching in this respect as educators within a public education system in a Jewish and democratic State? The third question relates to the study of Bible – a mandatory subject in Israeli schools – and to Jewish heritage as a whole (to the extent that it is taught): how do Waldorf teachers treat Steiner's insights on the Bible and Judaism?

We may also ask: what about Christianity? As expressed in his writings, Steiner's thinking is more Christian than Christianity's – an authentic, mystic,

43 In recent years, parental fees in Waldorf schools have been regulated in accordance with *Ministry of Education* directives (it's only taken 20 years!). I am still not sure that the *Ministry of Education* (wishes to) know that an independent fee still exists in Waldorf schools, which determine their own rules. If monies are being taken from parents out of line with the school's unique needs but in the name of economic justice, every school has the right to act in the same way. The *Ministry of Education* should thus inform all schools of this potential option. Other civil servants with low salaries can do likewise – early-career medical consultants, state-employed psychologists, social workers (who are paid even less). This would lead to anarchy, of course. On the other hand, anyone in the public sector unhappy with his or her low salary could engage in a legal fight or turn to the private sector. Any other route would lead to a corruption of values.

44 On Steiner's attitude towards Jewry, see: Staudenmaier (2005), Koren (2012), and at length, Koren (2019, vol. 2, third part, in Hebrew).

occult Christianity at whose centre lies the Christian messianic figure on whom the future of humanity rests. Is it not right, in light of the horrors Jews have suffered in Christian countries – i.e. classical Christian anti-Semitism and its modern/racial manifestations (both coexisting in Steiner’s thought) – to inform the public at large and the parental public in particular about the Christian core upon which his teaching rests?<sup>45</sup>

I am certain that the anthroposophic answer would be that Steiner’s doctrine (taught in schools) is one matter and his educational philosophy and practice quite another. This is a partial and misleading reply.<sup>46</sup> Nor is it justified from a metaphysical perspective as per the anthroposophic world-view itself, which maintains that spiritual entities operate and influence behind every phenomenon (including anthroposophy and Waldorf education) – just like the soul in the body.

It transpires that parents who send their children to Waldorf schools are both untroubled by and uninterested in such questions. These questions also do not interest the *Ministry of Education* or teaching-training colleges. We do indeed live in a “wonderful country.”

### Epilogue and Two Possible Solutions

Let me cite two final – and to my mind harrowing – accounts from Amit’s book, both examples of ideological fanaticism:

- 1 Conversation with Nadav, the Grade 7 class teacher, about pupil evaluation. He says:

‘I don’t assess them according to a general norm. Nor do I tell them what’s expected of them – certainly not the expectations defined by

45 Is it not right and proper that parents should know that Steiner views the God of the Bible as the god of the moon and the God of the New Testament as the god of the sun? If we are truly talking about occultism, should the children not be exposed to such teachings? Perhaps they are in fact being brought into contact covertly with anthroposophic Christianity. Take thanking the sun (as Amit refers to), for example: is the sun not perhaps more than just the sun? What about occult impact? Anthroposophic eurythmy is an occult art designed to profoundly change human structure and consciousness. Particularly prominent in the “etheric body” – the life-giving body – it is adapted to children in Waldorf education. Pupils in anthroposophic Waldorf schools who participate in eurythmy lessons thus do so not only as part of their study of the movement but also in order to strengthen their life forces as they develop. For Steiner, the Christian messiah also operates in an actual sense – particularly in the etheric sphere and body – as the healer of humanity. Should parents not at least know about this?

Anecdote: An anthroposophist who helped out at the anthroposophic teacher-training college once told me that, when asked about anthroposophy and Christianity, he replied that Steiner had addressed numerous issues, including Christianity. Is it proper, in the name of Waldorf education, to lie to people?

46 For an interesting discussion of the relationship between Steinerian doctrine and Waldorf education, see Schieren (2015).



the Ministry of Education that are meant to apply to every student, irrespective of his personality, ability, and difficulties' [. . .]. '[D]on't forget,' he adds, '*we are creating a new language*, fuelled by a completely different concept of the educational process. This isn't a scientific language, linked to the jargon prevalent within the educational realm, but a language that rests on a comprehensive view of human development. *The Ministry of Education will never understand it*, but it's also what schools and Waldorf have to continue to resist: the demand for indices and outputs, for immediate results, in accordance with which we are meant to examine our pupils – how many words they should read in a minute, whether they know how to name properly.' 'You should understand,' he says, 'the value of most of the things we are doing today *will only become clear in another decade*. It's impossible, forbidden, to judge them now.'

(Amit, 2022, p. 75 [my italics])<sup>47</sup>

I shall lay aside the issue of achievements because I think that even someone who has never studied in a school setting can complete his or her education to school level in a relatively short period of time. I am more disturbed by other things – the extent to which this teacher employs stereotypes, denigrates the “ordinary” system, and thinks highly of Waldorf. Waldorf education's self-laudation includes and rests upon the dehumanisation of “ordinary” education. Do teachers in the “ordinary” system assess pupils solely on the basis of a general norm? Do “ordinary” teachers not view their pupils as human beings? Does the Waldorf teacher create a new language fed by a completely different concept of the educational process? The statements he makes seem to suggest that “ordinary” people, including those within the *Ministry of*

47 Another anecdote about anthroposophic fanaticism: Before my book on Steiner was published, I participated in a book launch for another volume at a bookshop. When the audience were informed that my book was about to come out, my critical stance being well-known (having published two unfavourable articles in the press), anthroposophists asked the editor, behind the scenes, who could properly review it (with no Steiner experts existing in the country except anthroposophists). When someone reported the conversation to me afterwards, noting that they seemed to want to “kill” the book by silence, I replied that in principle they were right in its evaluation. It was thus decided that, alongside another scholar who was a specialist in religions and with a certain knowledge of Steiner, an anthroposophist would evaluate it as per the custom of scientific contributions (a scientific review by two scholars). Sometime later, I received a notice from the editor announcing that the anthroposophic reviewer was going to critique the book as unworthy of publication. Wishing to remain anonymous (his right), he conditioned his judgement on my not seeing the review so that I could not respond to his arguments. I have never encountered such a phenomenon in my life – an author not being allowed to read the claims made against his book. This is what I mean by ideological-religious fanaticism. To date, I have not received any substantial criticism (worthy of being addressed) of my volume; Israeli anthroposophists appear to prefer “killing” a tome by ignoring it.



*Education*, are incapable of understanding what real education is and what Waldorf education does for people. According to him, great results will only be revealed years down the road – i.e. when today’s children have grown up.

I am well acquainted with this promise of a bright future, which rests, of course, on Steiner’s own doctrine. My two adult sons studied for a not insignificant period of time in a Waldorf school and have friends on both sides of the fence. All the latter come from a middle-class background. I cannot see any difference between the outcome of Waldorf education and that of the “ordinary” framework. The anthroposophic Waldorf graduates do not seem any better, more considerate, or even healthier physically or mentally. I doubt whether I cannot see deeply enough into the profound holistic processes that Waldorf schools ostensibly promote. In certain cases, I have noticed that some anthroposophic graduates suffer from serious mental problems, which I do not attribute in particular to Waldorf education.

I shall thus offer an alternative to the “orthodox” position (right view) expressed by the anthroposophist teacher just cited. This is embodied in the tale of the *Emperor’s New Clothes* – from the same children’s fables to which anthroposophists ascribe weighty occult significance. To the extent to which his opinions represent those of all anthroposophists rather than being innovative – including his attitude towards the *Ministry of Education* and the Israeli higher-education system (i.e. academia and academic research, upon which education itself rests) – my first proposal is that these schools become private, not least due to their double salaries. Their proper placement is in the free market.

- (2) The account I found most shocking in Amit’s book relates to an anthroposophic teacher in the school, who was also the mother of a child at the same school:

The Grade 6 class teacher was sick and I was filling in for her. This being my first encounter with the class as a whole, I told them a little about myself and my children, who were in a democratic school. We talked about choice and personal responsibility, personal mentoring, and council structures. A week or so later, I received an email from a teacher in the school, whose daughter is in that class: ‘when you, an authority and significant figure, tell my daughter about democratic education, you are in essence infringing on my parental authority, casting doubt on my unflattering choice of how to educate my children. Could it be that although you are the school principal your heart lies elsewhere, in a utopian place in which children are equal to adults? Such acts give the impression of a lack of trust in the person supposed to represent me and my view of education as a mother and teacher. They are liable to induce ideas of conspiracy and subversion that are already hanging in the air. It’s a shame: no one is interested in this’.

(Amit, 2022, p. 41)

Seeking high and low for any possible justification of this statement – i.e. a rational argument that warrants it at least from her perspective – I can only think that the mention of a democratic school might confuse small children. As an alternative, I would suggest to her a sort of guided imagery: her daughter comes back from school and asks about democratic education. The mother replies age-appropriately – i.e. explains democratic education to her and why she has sent her to an anthroposophic school.

The teacher/mother's response reminds me of another case: Several years ago, Matti Caspi, one of the most talented songwriters in Israel, gave a radio interview. Having just released an album of children's songs, the interviewer noted that they did not sound like traditional ones. Caspi replied that, as far as he is concerned, small children are not infantile.

This chapter has painted a rather abject picture of Israeli social, cultural, educational, and socio-economic reality. While I have sought to describe how this is related to deep problems in Israeli society, it is also linked to chaos and confusion (presented herein as a lack of cultural knowledge and understanding). One example of confusion is associated with an Orthodox/ Ultra-Orthodox education network known as *Ma'ayanot R. Hiya* [R. Hiya's Fountains]. Established over 15 years ago, this was immediately dubbed "anthropo-dossi" by the public.<sup>48</sup> Founded by a former anthroposophist turned Ultra-Orthodox, this network initially sought to integrate anthroposophic principles into its educational network. I have absolutely no problem with this. However, the religious Ultra-Orthodox public attracted to this network – seeking an alternative education for their children because they were unhappy with the Ultra-Orthodox system – was completely unaware of Steiner's teachings and principles, including their Christian foundation. Eventually, some rabbis intervened and warned parents that Steiner's thought was opposed to Judaism. Today, this educational stream only claims to be Ultra-Orthodox, selling itself as "Jewish education from the root" and only incorporating isolated elements from Waldorf education, such as arts and crafts.<sup>49</sup>

My second proposal with respect to Waldorf education in Israel – which I raised in an article I uploaded onto the internet in Hebrew and English (see n. 26) – is a necessary inference from my argument here. Israeli institutions

48 "Doss(i)" is a slang term for the Ultra-Orthodox, frequently carrying negative connotations.

49 As noted in 2015 by one of the leaders of this educational stream in the anthroposophic magazine *Adam Olam* in an interview entitled *Anthropo-dossim? – Wrong address*. In an interview with another journalist (in 2019), he again declared, "We aren't anthropo-dossim," – i.e. we have no connection with Steiner's philosophy.

Anecdote: After publishing an article in the press on anti-Semitism in Steiner's thoughts and his views on Judaism, the editor of *Adama Olam* wrote me saying that I was harming the delicate relations between anthroposophy/anthroposophists and Judaism/Jews. This caused me to wonder whether he is unaware of the biblical commandment: "Do not place an obstacle in the way of a blind man" – in this context, concealing knowledge or misinforming someone with no idea of the issues under discussion.

should and must issue a research-based document making reliable information about Steiner and his educational philosophy available to those attracted to Waldorf education and the public in general – including the facts concerning his anti-Semitic and racist views and the history of the movement after his death in respect to these. This is precisely one place where academic research in the fields of culture – which has largely become irrelevant to the public – can make a topical contribution.

In this article, I have associated Waldorf education and Steinerian doctrine in Israel with the politically left middle class – what I refer to as the “metaphysical left.” When we examine this issue, rather than being humanistic in the conventional sense of “secular” or proponents of universalist natural religion (as per Lessing’s humanism), the members of this subsector can be defined as Christian/metaphysical humanism (the birth of the Christian messiah in the human soul as the supreme realisation of humanity and pan-human unity in the Christian messiah). If we do not seek to blur, neglect, or remove this fact, the spread of Steinerian thought in Israel, in particular via the anthroposophic Waldorf movement, may well deepen the rift between the “tribes of Israel.” I have further endeavoured to demonstrate that the dissemination of anthroposophic Waldorf education and anthroposophy per se in Israel is largely due to a profound cultural void in “secular” Israeli society and the Israeli education system, neither of which have succeeded in creating a spiritual/cultural/humanistic alternative to the two Orthodox streams of Judaism.

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# 3 Late Deployment and Consolidation of Waldorf Pedagogy in Spain

*Patricia Quiroga Uceda*

## Introduction

In the first two decades of the 21st century, Waldorf pedagogy in Spain has achieved its greatest expansion in history. Currently there are more Waldorf schools than ever in nearly every region of the country. Its popularity and recognition are also notable in the debate on education in Spain while academic circles show growing interest in the pedagogical dimension of anthroposophy. The model of education originally developed by Rudolf Steiner already has over 100 years of history (Uhrmacher, 1995). In the case of Spain, however, its implementation was late in the coming: the first Waldorf kindergarten did not open here until 1979 (Quiroga & Girard, 2015). In comparison to other countries in Europe, the history of Waldorf pedagogy in Spain is recent.

Currently, Waldorf pedagogy is conceptualised in Spain as an “alternative pedagogy,” akin to how the Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Emmi Pikler programmes are perceived. Across the nation, especially in the last 20 years, there has been a growing interest in methods that are mindful of upbringing and learning. Indeed, there is a notable number of families that opt for “alternative pedagogies” that break away from conventional models of education and explore the margins of the pedagogic imaginary (Carbonell i Sebarroja, 2015). These alternative schools are usually privately owned, as are Waldorf schools. There are only two exceptions of Waldorf schools in Spain that receive part of their financing through public funds: the Basque Country<sup>1</sup> and the Canary Islands.<sup>2</sup>

The details of the theoretical underpinnings of these alternative methods are not widely known, especially in the case of the families who choose these models of education for their children. The Waldorf schools in Spain themselves are often categorised as free schools that encourage the child’s

1 This school is *Geroa Waldorf Eskola*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230802132543/https://geroawaldorfeskola.com/> (memento from August 2 2023).

2 This is a kindergarten: *Centro Infantil Waldorf Finca El Moral*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230802132651/https://waldorfmoral.com/> (memento from 2 August 2023).

autonomy, time management, and the preference for active learning through play or art. According to testimonies of Waldorf families, the parents who feel drawn to the spiritual dimension that underpins the pedagogy are not a majority.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the spiritual component of Waldorf pedagogy can be often a cause of distrust and reticence, according to the role that Catholicism has played in the history of Spain, which will be further studied later.

Taking these issues into consideration, this chapter analyses the process by which Waldorf pedagogy was deployed in Spain. For a detailed analysis of the implementation of this educational model in the country, it is considered fundamental to attend to the late reception of Steiner's ideas on education as well as to the contextual elements that fostered this particular phenomenon (Quiroga, 2015). At a methodological level, this work is inserted within the history of social movements. Based on the theory developed by Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (2011), it can be said that Waldorf pedagogy meets the characteristics of a social movement to the extent that it defends conflicting ideas that allow its opponents to be clearly identified and that it structures informal networks connecting individuals who identify with these ideas and share a distinct collective identity.

Three fundamental aspects form the structure of this chapter. The first section discusses the current implementation of Waldorf pedagogy as featured in public and academic discourse. The second section explores the complexity of fitting the esoteric underpinnings of Steiner's theory of education into a country with a markedly Catholic tradition such as Spain. Finally, the last section analyses how Waldorf pedagogy has become an alternative form of education that is gaining in presence among certain segments of the population of Spain because of how it responds to the specific demands of families today.

### **The Public and Academic Space in Spain: The Difficult Relationship Between Anthroposophy and Orthodox Science**

The presence of Waldorf pedagogy in the public and academic spheres is conditioned by the ultimate underpinnings of this model of education: anthroposophy. The theoretical foundations of this proposal are the esoteric ideas Steiner developed in the early 20th century, a meshwork of his own ideas and notions and theosophy<sup>4</sup> that are still suited to the rational language of science in its current orthodox conception, which has on many occasions

3 In fact, many families discover anthroposophy once their children have been at school for several years. Some of them might see it as acceptable; some others do not. Here is the testimony of a Spanish family who did not have a good experience regarding the discovery of anthroposophy at a Waldorf school: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230802132744/https://estudiarmeior.net/2018/11/30/algunos-secretos-de-las-escuelas-waldorf-al-descubierto/> (memento from 2 August 2023).

4 It is important to mention that Steiner held the position of Secretary of the *German Section of the Theosophical Society* from 1903 to 1912.

become the object of significant criticism. Thus, in Spain, as in other countries, the expansion process of Waldorf pedagogy is hampered by Steiner's own conceptual scaffolding.

Even so, in the arena of public debate, Waldorf pedagogy has recently been carving out its own space, which has given it greater visibility especially over the last two decades. The presence of Waldorf schools in the mass media is a good bellwether for calibrating this phenomenon. Some publications on Waldorf pedagogy allude to its novel presence as an alternative for families looking for another type of education for their children. Others place the focus on the performance of these schools from a sensationalist stance. We will see some examples shortly. Either way, what is clear is that, in Spain, it is complicated to find rigorous, in-depth reports on this pedagogy.

Newspaper articles that present the novelties of Waldorf pedagogy highlight specific pedagogical aspects. Special emphasis is given to aspects such as the fact that, at these schools, students “learn without exams, without textbooks, without homework, or without using [computer] screens” as their main didactic tool (Fominaya, 2019). Along this same line, different media allude to ways of applying elements typically found in Waldorf pedagogy at home. These rather decontextualised descriptions, which are a majority, feature simple activities such as cooking with children, fostering symbolic play, and enabling spaces for carrying out activities and spaces for free movement and experimentation (Ruiz, 2019, July 18). Lastly there are often press releases informing about public figures and celebrities in Spain who have enrolled their children at a Waldorf school (Lorenzo, 2013).

Among the news stories predominantly of a sensationalistic kind, the texts generally describe Waldorf schools as eccentric spaces where offbeat families enrol their children. At the far end of this type of text are reports that present students of Waldorf pedagogy as victims of a sect. An example of this can be seen in the following report:

In Spain, the anthroposophic associations usually grow by creating small ‘alternative kindergartens’ based on ‘active pedagogy’, ‘creative play’, etc. [. . .] to then attempt to turn them into schools. This all appeals to families interested in all things ‘alternative’. This is the type of public they can then present Steiner’s doctrines, always offered up as a path to free exploration but often leading to sect-like dependence. However, many families can go through Waldorf schools without ever hearing the word ‘esoteric’. Many others are used instead.

(Religión en libertad, 2018)

Another type of sensationalist news seeking to show certain controversial aspects of Waldorf schools is related to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this sense, what happened at the Waldorf school *Geroa Eskola* in the Basque Country in November 2020 had considerable repercussions in the media. When classes began in September, the school did not make the use of facemasks obligatory.



Two months later, there was a major outbreak of coronavirus that infected nearly 25% of the students. Some of the teachers denounced the lack of health measures, and the district attorney's office opened an investigation to see whether the school had been negligent. The school remained closed for several weeks. Many news outlets picked up the story accusing the school of being "negationists" and on some occasions alluding to the esoteric underpinnings of the Waldorf model of education. The online newspaper *El Diario* led the news story on 12 December with the headline *District attorney opens double investigation into Waldorf negationist school in Álava* (Rioja, 2020, December 12).

In the mass media, Waldorf pedagogy receives superficial coverage that only rarely turns to experts on the matter – such as teachers or academics – to delve deeper into specific aspects. Nor does it help that on the few occasions in which teachers and staff with direct ties to Waldorf schools participate, they do not show the esoteric background to their practice. However, in academic circles, the situation is different. Waldorf pedagogy is beginning to be studied in its complexity, although research into it is still scarce.

To date, four doctoral dissertations have been defended in Spain that focus their attention on Waldorf pedagogy or the work of Rudolf Steiner. One of them was defended by Janine Künzi I Poffet at the *University of Barcelona* in 2000, titled *Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical ideas: education and anthroposophy*. At the *Polytechnic University of Catalunya*, María Consuelo Vallespir Machado defended her doctoral dissertation in 2005 with the title *Towards a spiritualization of matter through architecture, study, and application of Rudolf Steiner's eurythmic method as a tool for architectural observation and creation in conversation with ones of modernity*. In 2006, Petra Huber presented her dissertation at the *University of La Laguna* with the title *Teaching basic level languages at a Waldorf school*. Finally, in 2015, at the *Complutense University of Madrid*, Patricia Quiroga defended her dissertation titled *The Reception of Waldorf education in Spain*.

On the level of books, the *Editorial Rudolf Steiner* in Spain has published a number of volumes, although most are translations made of Steiner's works. Also noteworthy are the different scholarly essays published in Spain on matters regarding Waldorf pedagogy. These works open lines of critique and permit taking a deeper look into specific aspects of Steiner's model of education. Chief among these publications are the book written in Catalan by Janine Künzi I Poffet titled *Idees pedagògiques de Rudolf Steiner: educació i antroposofia* [Rudolf Steiner's Pedagogical Ideas: education and anthroposophy] published by Solsona Comunicacions in 2002 and the book by Patricia Quiroga published at Biblioteca Nueva in 2018 with the title *Rudolf Steiner: Conferencias sobre pedagogía Waldorf* [Rudolf Steiner: Conferences on Waldorf pedagogy].

In the academic field, especially in the last 20 years, there has been an interest in exploring the theoretical foundations and main historical references of Waldorf pedagogy. This has been reflected in different articles published



in scholarly journals. Two different approaches can be found to the study of Steiner's ideas and the main notions that underpin the teaching practice at Waldorf schools. First are works that start out by making a clear difference between these initiatives and those of the new school or progressive education. These research works have analysed the particulars of Waldorf pedagogy and its elements that require differential study with respect to other concurrent educational movements. Of note here are the publications by Patricia Quiroga in academic journals in the field of pedagogy in Spain, such as *Bordón* (2012), *Temps d'Educació* [Time for Education] (2014), *Teoría de la Educación* [Theory of education] (2018), and *Educació i Història* [Education and History] (2018).<sup>5</sup>

Other academic articles consider Waldorf pedagogy as just another alternative method and include it in a long list of reformist experimental methodologies. Specifically in Spain, this line of research considers Waldorf schools as part of a new wave of movements for pedagogic renewal that has been becoming consolidated since the beginning of the 21st century. An example of this kind of article are the ones written by Javier Pericacho and Sara Ramos, published in journals such as *Revista Complutense de Educación* [Complutense Journal of Education] (2014) and *Educació i Història. Revista d'Història de l'Éducació* [Education and History: Journal of the History of Education] (2015).<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that, from the academic context, activities have been held on different occasions to discuss specific questions about Waldorf pedagogy. This is the case of the Waldorf pedagogy workshops held at the *Faculty of Education of the Complutense University of Madrid* on 13 February 2020. At this type of space, priority is given to promoting the pedagogic model, with little in-depth discussion and no dialog with key scholars

5 Some of these works are: Quiroga, P., & Igelmo, J. (2013). *La pedagogía Waldorf y el juego en el jardín de infancia: una propuesta teórica singular* [Waldorf education and play in the kindergarten: a unique theoretical approach]. *Bordón. Revista de Pedagogía*, 65(1), 79–92; Igelmo, J., & Quiroga, P. (2018). *La pedagogía ligera en tiempos hipermodernos: el homeschooling, las escuelas Waldorf y la nueva pedagogía ignaciana* [Light pedagogy in hypermodern times: homeschooling, Waldorf schools and the new Ignatian pedagogy.]. *Teoría de la Educación*, 30(1), 75–94; Quiroga, P., & Sánchez Serrano, S. (2019). *La educación lenta en perspectiva histórica: conceptualización, desarrollo y concreción en las iniciativas de Madre de día Waldorf en España* [Slow education in historical perspective: conceptualisation, development and concretisation in the Waldorf Day Mother initiatives in Spain]. *Educació i Història*, 34, 121–147.

6 Ramos, S., & Pericacho, F. J. (2015). *Una propuesta de innovación docente para enseñar la historia de la renovación pedagógica en la universidad* [A teaching innovation proposal for teaching the history of pedagogical renewal at university level]. *Educació i història*, 26, 65–88 and Pericacho Gómez, F. J. (2014). *Pasado y presente de la renovación pedagógica en España (de finales del Siglo XIX a nuestros días). Un recorrido a través de escuelas emblemáticas* [Past and present of pedagogical renewal in Spain (from the end of the 19th century to the present day). A journey through emblematic schools]. *Revista Complutense de Educación*, 25(1), 47–67.

that could have led to questioning specific aspects of Steiner's pedagogical method. It appears that those who head the main Waldorf schools in Spain made use of these academic spaces for their own promotion, avoiding scholarly dialog on the theoretical underpinnings and methods belonging to this pedagogical approach.

In addition to these publications are others that take an interest in Waldorf pedagogy from an informative perspective. These types of publications are more numerous and are written mainly by currently active Waldorf teachers about different methodological aspects of the pedagogy. Examples abound: *El centenario de la pedagogía Waldorf: bases pedagógicas de la pedagogía Waldorf de Rudolf Steiner* [The Centenary of Waldorf Education: Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical foundations of Waldorf education] by Pedro Álvarez-Montesserín (2019), teacher at the Waldorf school in Alicante; *Pedagogía Waldorf: el respeto al ser humano* [Waldorf Education: respect for the human being] by Antonio Malagón (2003), teacher at the *Escuela Libre Micael* in Madrid; and *Actividades artísticas y manualidades en la escuela infantil Waldorf* [Arts and crafts Activities in the Waldorf Nursery School] by Heidi Bieler and Elena Martín Artajo (2003), at the *Escuela Libre Micael* and *Artabán Waldorf School*, both in Madrid. Predominant in these types of texts is a wholesale assimilation of Steiner's main concepts and the pedagogic activities that have been developed over the years from an anthroposophic perspective. The main source of these papers is the authors' daily contact with the learners and working with an educational method with a spiritual component.

On the other hand, no school of study in Spain takes Rudolf Steiner's ideas as its reference. Rather, the study groups created under the umbrella of the *Anthroposophical Society* in different places in Spain tend to focus their task on reading and studying Steiner. Similarly lacking are any forums, blogs, journals, or publications in which to compare and contrast different possible lines of interpreting Steiner's ideas. One of the most widely circulated publications of Waldorf pedagogy is the *Revista Steiner-Waldorf Educación* [Steiner-Waldorf Education Magazine], edited and published from the *Escuela Libre Micael* since 2005. This publication is the *Asociación de Centros Educativos Waldorf's* [Association of Waldorf Education Centres'] own organ of communication,<sup>7</sup> often featuring testimonies on Waldorf schools around Spain or a Waldorf pedagogy take on a particular issue or concern. The few times this journal has attempted to integrate more philosophical or theoretical contents, it becomes manifest how difficult it is to face this type of subject with rigour. This can be seen clearly in the publication of the Steiner centennial commemorative volume corresponding to issues 29

<sup>7</sup> Back issues available at <https://web.archive.org/save/www.colegioswaldorf.org/revista> (momento from 2 August 2023).

and 30,<sup>8</sup> where the biography of Rudolf Steiner and the history of Waldorf schools are presented through a description and succession of data without a contextualised or critical analysis of both issues.

In terms of the creation of new pedagogical materials, Spain is hardly a front-runner. Innovation usually comes from experienced instructors who bring some matters into their classroom. It is true that this educational model demands a significant investment of time; indeed, in each year of primary education, the teacher must work with a very new curriculum. Considerable worth is given to creating one's own materials. In addition, teachers must learn many things by heart (songs, stories, nursery rhymes), attend to individual needs, prepare little theatre plays, etc. All this places significant constraint on the teacher's ability to develop materials more systematically. One element that explains the lack of material development in Spain concerns the limitations in the training given to future teachers at the main school, the *Escuela Libre Micael* in Madrid. After attending the teacher training courses given there, whose content is mainly anthroposophic and theoretical, many years of subsequent teaching experience are needed to be able to come up with possibilities of innovation that can have an impact on daily classroom teaching. Added to this is the difficulty schools have in getting their teachers to stay on the same project for long periods of time, due in part to their long and generally poorly paid workdays. Therefore, in their day-to-day teaching, the teachers make do by following the general guidelines of Steiner's curriculum.

As regards university-level teacher training programs, Waldorf pedagogy is not a commonly taught topic. It depends largely on the instructor's own choice of whether or not to include this content in the syllabus. However, it is being taught increasingly more often, mostly because of the repercussions Waldorf pedagogy has on certain circles' interest in educational matters. At present, manuals such as the one published by Horsori are available and include Waldorf pedagogy as a leading pedagogical alternative from the perspective of the history of educational ideas (Igelmo & Quiroga, 2018).

Relations between Waldorf pedagogy and the academic world are diverse. The existence of a postgraduate degree in Childhood Education at the Madrid and Barcelona campuses of the *University of La Salle* was a worthy yet exceptional example. This course programme offered both a general introduction to anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy and also delved deeper into methodological and didactic aspects of childhood education. And although it was taught at a non-anthroposophic institution, the faculty were professionals who were involved in the Waldorf world. Importantly, this meant that they were connected to the educational practice and had considerable experience in Waldorf pedagogy. The only drawback is that their perspective may

8 Available at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20230802140212/https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0153/3493/2544/files/Waldorf\\_29\\_cast\\_WEB.pdf?27](https://web.archive.org/web/20230802140212/https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0153/3493/2544/files/Waldorf_29_cast_WEB.pdf?27) (memento from 2 August 2023).

be said to be closer to that of promoting Waldorf pedagogy than to presenting a critical scholarly approach suitable for a university setting.

Lastly to be noted are two other short-term training courses taught at Spanish universities. The first is the *University of La Laguna* (Canary Islands) extension course titled *Good Practices in Music, Plastic Arts, and Movement to Optimize the Classroom Environment: An Introduction to Waldorf Pedagogy*. This course was taught in June 2019, the result of a collaboration agreement signed between the *University of La Laguna* and the *Asociación para el Impulso a las Iniciativas Pedagógicas Libres* [Association for Promoting Free Pedagogic Initiatives]. It is interesting to note that after this agreement was signed, there was a critical reaction in social media. Eparquío Delgado (2019), a faculty member, expressed that “my university is contributing to the diffusion of the pseudoscience called Waldorf Pedagogy,” and David Rodríguez Toledo (2019), a student, voiced that the university was “leaping through the hoop of pseudosciences and encouraging a pedagogical model based on anthroposophy. How can a public institution fall into such practices?”<sup>9</sup> The other training course is the summer course at the *University Pablo de Olavide* in Seville, taught by Pedro Álvarez-Montesserín, titled *Mathematics and Reading and Writing in Waldorf Pedagogy: Learning through rhythm, Movement, Shapes, and Art* in 2015. All told, it can be seen that Waldorf pedagogy is not thoroughly settled in the academic scene in Spain. One of the possible reasons underlying this void may have to do with the awkward fit of anthroposophic underpinnings in a country with a strong Catholic background. This significant question is analysed next.

### **Esoteric Underpinnings of Waldorf Pedagogy and Its Complex Fit in a Country With a Catholic Tradition**

As noted previously, Waldorf schools in Spain are one of the so-called “alternative pedagogies.” Moreover, among the models encompassed under that broad category, Waldorf schools are also ones featuring an esoteric underlayer with considerable weight on its conception of the human being, the organisation of the schoolday, and the curriculum. This esoteric base generates different reactions that will be analysed here and that largely relate to current views on religious phenomenon.

Anthroposophy is the esoteric philosophy Rudolf Steiner spent much of his life developing after founding the *Anthroposophical Society* in 1913 (Lindenberg, 2017). It blended two elements Steiner had become familiar with long before: (1) the Christianity that was ever present in his childhood, especially Catholicism by way of his mother and the parish priest whom Steiner

9 A more extensive article detailing all the reactions can be found at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230802141147/www.infocatolica.com/blog/infories.php/1902110734-la-universidad-de-la-laguna-p> (memento from 2 August 2023).

greatly admired, and (2) Theosophy, the teachings of which he learned deeply through his participation and leadership of the *German Section of the Theosophical Society*, a position he held from 1903 to 1912. These two theoretical underpinnings of anthroposophy become key to understanding the complexity of the reception process of Waldorf pedagogy in Spain.

Spain is traditionally a Catholic country, although the last 50 years have witnessed a profound process of secularisation. To understand secularisation, the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor is a prime reference. He starts his well-known essay *A secular age* (2007) by noting that modernity has caused a loss of religiousness in people's daily doings and a decline in religions. Thus Taylor observes that as a consequence of "the falling off of religious belief and practice," it seems clear at least in countries where modernity has fully taken hold, as is the case of Spain, that "people [are] turning away from God and no longer going to Church" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2). In a context in which rationality and scientism are key elements of the orthodoxy, Steiner's schools feature a heterodox model on the edges of the conventional ones. It should be noted that, generally, the types of families interested in the Waldorf education model are usually upper middle class, progressive, and interested in offering their children an educational experience different from Catholic pedagogic traditionalism. This is the sociological pattern of families that normally seek another type of education for their children in Spain. Thus when families approach these schools, attracted by their pedagogic method and their somewhat disruptive aesthetics, they can often be surprised, in their secular perspective, to find a pedagogy with esoteric foundations. Alternative education is usually translated in our pedagogical imaginary as secular schools.

At the same time, other families, more from a plural perspective of religious phenomena, have no trouble fitting the spiritual dimension that underlies the pedagogy at Waldorf schools. One possible line of interpretation converges on the theses developed by Peter Berger in his well-known essay *The Many Altars of Modernity* (2014). In this book, Berger analyses how the contemporary world is characterised by an explosion in diverse ways to channel religious fervour. To a great extent, his analysis approaches Gilles Lipovetsky, who has analysed the rise of the "à la carte religions" that have arisen in hypermodernity:

The West has many movements that fit in with the liberal culture of the individual in charge of his own fate. Proof thereof can be found in the many 'à la carte religions,' i.e., groups and networks that combine the spiritual traditions of East and West, and use religious tradition as a means for subjective fulfilment of their practitioners. Here there is no conflict with individualist modernity, since tradition has been left to the criteria of the individuals, jury-rigged and put into play for purposes of self-realization and integration into the community. The hyper-modern era does not do away with traditions of a sacred nature; rather, it simply

restructures them by individualizing, disseminating, and emotionalizing the beliefs and practices. This current trend is giving rise to an increase in unregulated religions and post-traditional identities.

(Lipovetsky, 2008, pp. 98–99)

In the current perception of Waldorf pedagogy, especially in being put off by its religious underpinnings, there are elements that can be explained by Spain's own history. Here, the debate on education and religion has traditionally been polarised between Catholicism and lay (mainly anti-Catholic) society, whereas other ideas or traditions have played a lesser role. This polarisation has led to Spain distancing itself from major spiritually based organisations that gained political, cultural, and social clout in countries such as the United States, England, Switzerland, and Germany. This aspect is supported/grounded on the fact that the few associations with ties to movements such as Theosophy gained little traction in Madrid and Barcelona: in 1916 the *Theosophical Society* had 155 members; by 1921 the figure rose to 377, and by 1934, at its peak in Spain, it had 469 members. These figures are anecdotally small in comparison to the dimension such societies reached in other Western countries, such as England, where by 1921 the number of members was 5,105 or France with 2,559 (Penalva, 2013, p. 41). The only school with links to Theosophy in Spain, the *Escuela Teosófica Damón de Vallcarca* [Damón de Vallcarca Theosophical School], was founded in Barcelona in 1927 but remained open for only ten years.

These historical particularities largely explain the late reception of Waldorf pedagogy in Spain. In the 1920s and 1930s, no school or initiative incorporated this educational model since discourse on education at that time was monopolised by the Catholic and lay sectors. On one side were the anti-Catholic progressive sectors, whose associations of reference were the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* [Free Institution of Education], the *Escuela Moderna de Ferrer I Guardia* [Modern School of Ferrer I Guardia], and the *Cooperativa de Enseñanza Laica* [Secular Teaching Cooperative] inspired on the ideas of the French pedagogue Célestine Freinet. On the other side were the religious congregations that enjoyed considerable power in the political, cultural, and social life of the country. In this context, there was a possible space for Waldorf schools grounded in an esoteric pedagogy with a strongly spiritual component but at the same time removed from the scholastic pedagogy of Catholic schools.

It is interesting to note that, despite this polarised situation, the part of Steiner's philosophy that at first sparked interest in Spain was anthroposophy rather than the accompanying pedagogy. And this occurred in the 1960s, in the very specific context of the final years of the Franco dictatorship, a dictatorial regime with a clearly Catholic foundation. Thus, at the end of the 1960s, when the Franco regime was nearing its last decade of power, a new framework of possibilities began to open up. Some sectors of society were seeking a renewed way of understanding spirituality without fully leaving



Catholicism. It is important to recall that the New Age movement was gaining many adepts on the international level and upheld its principles of the quest for peace and love and experimenting with new forms of spirituality, especially from the East. In this sense, anthroposophy featured many elements that appealed to a meditative kind of informal, self-directed personal development that did not require joining or attending any particular religious institution. This is very clear in the origins of Waldorf education in the Spanish context.

The reception of anthroposophy in Spain was brought about largely by Sandra Aiste, a Lithuanian woman who recently arrived in Spain in 1967. She began by giving yoga classes, after which she promoted the reading of Steiner's writings. The way Aiste taught her yoga workshops did not follow conventional lines. As Waldorf teachers Heidi Bieler and Antonio Malagón note, it was "a Western, spiritualized and Christianized yoga" that Aiste herself called *Cosmorritmia* [Cosmo Rhythm] (personal communication, 21 January 2014). These sessions were held clandestinely at a studio located in downtown Madrid and were attended by the first Waldorf teachers in Spain as well as a number of personalities from the upper class of the day (personal communication, 21 January 2014). The attendees were interested in developing new topics and perspectives beyond the national and Catholic values that officially dominated the intellectual field in Spain. This first rapprochement of anthroposophy gave rise to an interest in anthroposophically based pedagogy. In that respect, two women played a key part: Irma Krause and Karen Armbruster, a teacher of Waldorf child education trained in Germany who brought the group practical know-how on educational matters. According to Armbruster: "all this about someone coming from Germany and telling them about Waldorf pedagogy was quite an event" (personal communication, 22 My 2015).

Especially significant in the early reception of Waldorf pedagogy in Spain is the case of four nuns who set aside their habits and their convents for a lay life while participating in and spreading anthroposophy. This is the case of Hermelina Delgado, Amelia Navas, Inés de Esteban, and Leonor Delgado, who learned about anthroposophy at a time of personal crisis in religious living. After their initial contacts with Steiner's ideas on education, these nuns set about incorporating notions of Waldorf pedagogy in their pastoral teaching. Their initiative ran into insurmountable obstacles that ended in them leaving the convent in the late 1970s, after which they spent their efforts on putting the principles of anthroposophy into practice in different areas.

With no clean break, there was a degree of continuity of anthroposophy with regard to Christianity, which may have made it more appealing to those who wanted to renew their Catholic religious convictions, especially in the years following the Vatican II (1962–1965). In turn, this same continuity produced a rejection in those looking for wholly alternative methods unencumbered from any Christian or religious underpinnings at all. Nevertheless, the experience of nuns who even chose to secularise is an element to take into

account insofar as it situates a possible line of continuity between Spanish Catholic tradition and Waldorf pedagogy. This line becomes especially worth studying since it presently entails specific projects at Waldorf schools located in spaces that originally belonged to the Catholic Church.

In Spain, the Catholic Church owns a vast heritage of sites that are often unused. This is the case of old seminaries for priests and schools that are currently shuttered. In recent years, Waldorf initiatives have regarded such buildings as an opportunity to carry out their activity since they often reach an agreement with the Church to rent the premises. They are sometimes even provided rent-free. The agreement becomes especially interesting when such premises are those of an old school, with the infrastructure ready, legalised, and minimally outfitted for school use, thereby solving the Waldorf's problem of suitable premises.

Some examples of this phenomenon can be found at the *Escola Waldorf La Font* [La Font Waldorf School] in Vic, Barcelona, which has rented a wing of a seminary of priests that was empty and the *Escuela Waldorf El Puente Azul* [The Blue Bridge Waldorf School] in Valladolid, which rents rooms from the *Colegio de la Sagrada Familia* [College of the Holy Family]. For their part, the religious congregations tend to be grateful for the opportunity for their buildings to house a school, fearing that an empty building may find its status as private property compromised.

### **Waldorf Pedagogy and Its Conceptualisation as an Alternative Pedagogy in Spain Today**

Globally, discourse in education is clearly becoming increasingly psychologised, based on measurements, standards, and certification processes while also being predicated on international evaluations such as *OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* (Tröhler, 2009). Furthermore, education as a technique developed by experts whose field of application is teaching is featured as the main axiom in how the 21st century imagines teaching and learning processes to be organised. Teachers search for techniques like products to help solve specific classroom problems systematically. Learners are more and more subject to precise techniques that draw sharp, one-way paths with aspirations of objectivity that, at least in theory, ensure that something can be learned quickly and effortlessly. The contents justify their presence in the curriculum on the basis of their technical applicability and are removed from prominent spaces if they are found to be based on speculative or rhetorical notions and thus lacking in instrumental use.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of head-on criticism of the technocratic turn that education systems were taking worldwide. Betting on technology and scientific discourse as a means and an end at the same time meant oversimplifying education and laying waste to one of the greatest humanistic debates dating back centuries and at times was even productive for the cultural,



social, political, and economic progress of the civilised world. Among the critics who raised their voices at this time were Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire.<sup>10</sup> The works by these two intellectuals became essential references for articulating a response to the configuration and expansion of education systems at the service of power and technology after the end of the Second World War, although by the 1980s and 1990s their critical theses were relegated to the background as secular, and technocratic discourse took over as hegemonic in matters of education (Igelmo et al., 2022).<sup>11</sup>

This systematic technification of education that began to spread in the 1970s has become an object of study since then. To William Pinar, for example, underlying the technification of teaching and learning processes is an idea of education that cognitive science reduces to a neurological and pharmacological type of knowledge. It is a paradigm of education in which “the questions of meaning and importance become secondary, and even suspicious” (Pinar, 2019, p. 245). Echoing ideas of the Canadian philosopher George Grant on a possible way out of the growing technification of education, Pinar calls precisely for a return to its spiritual component, since nowhere but there is where questions about the meaning and meaningfulness of existence have their place. Moreover, the spiritual component of education is what can bring about a reencounter with the past, with tradition, which enables individuals to confront their historicity at a time dominated by the presentism mediated by the culture of the screen.

As a function of the psychologistic and technicist direction that education has been taking in the last 50 years, Waldorf pedagogy in Spain is conceptualised as an “alternative pedagogy.” This loosely defined concept makes reference to educational methods that step away from the conventional education models that follow a hegemonic current when conceptualising the processes of institutionalised teaching and learning. Interesting in this regard is that Waldorf schools have managed to burst into the contemporary pedagogic debate without their religious component being the main issue, which had previously hindered its spread in Spain. From this point of view, one may say that after the reception of its esoteric dimension in Spain came the reception of its pedagogical side (Quiroga, 2015). The first Waldorf school that was inaugurated in Spain was the *Micael Kindergarten* in Madrid in 1979, just a year after ratification of the 1978 Constitution. At that time, the teachers themselves, in their spiritual and pedagogical quest, were the ones to found this undertaking, which began with only five children. Over time, this project caught the interest of a number of teachers and families, making it the most important school of Waldorf pedagogy in Spain. Today, the *Escuela Libre*

10 Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* published in 1971 and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from 1968 can be considered as references regarding education in the seventies.

11 Regarding this topic, it is interesting to take a look at the whole Special Issue of the journal *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* [Space, Time and Education], 2022 (9), 1.

*Micael* [Michael Free School] covers all grades, and a student can be enrolled from the age of 20 months up to 18 years old. The growth of this school reflects the unfolding process that Waldorf pedagogy has undergone in Spain over the last 40 years. This has been a slow process of implementation and consolidation up to the present day.

If Waldorf schools were received well in the 1980s, it was mainly because of their pedagogy, one that is still appealing and is founded on pillars that offer an alternative response to psychologicistic and technicistic views of education (Quiroga, 2015). Key elements here are the ecological perspective, the presence of natural materials, and a notable artistic component applied to didactics. These aspects have been considered very important for families choosing these schools since the beginning.<sup>12</sup> Added to it all are the unhurried rhythms that tend more to hold off learning some things with respect to processes of official education – this is evident in the case of learning to read and write, which at Waldorf schools begins at the primary education stage.

Similarly, in the case of Spain, the *Ley General de Educación* [General Law on Education] of 1970 brought a change in how the education system was organised, which from then on became predicated to notions more closely tied to productivity, economic development, and technological innovation. In this context, with their pedagogy strongly rooted in German idealism, Waldorf schools were able to channel the disaffection caused by the official trends in certain specific segments of the population. In this regard, Spain was no different from its neighbouring countries since this same technocratic shift of the official models led to the 1980s witnessing the greatest increase in Waldorf schools to date. Worldwide, this increase in numbers was reflected in the fact that in 1975 there were a total of 113 schools and in less than two decades, in 1992, the number of schools multiplied by five, reaching 567 (Werner & Plato, 2001, pp. 32–33).

Along with the shift towards technocratic models, the official discourse on education is also characterised by competitiveness, standardisation, and assessment of achievement. Waldorf pedagogy was created by Steiner in a context in which discourse on education was more focused on equal access to education, and thus there was no discourse based on competitiveness. When the competitiveness discourse became dominant, Waldorf pedagogy became a different model of education from the conventional one, and sparked interest in a large sector of the population who took a critical view of more orthodox models (Quiroga, 2015).

12 According to the testimony of a mother: “It was something wonderful. [. . .] To find a school like this in Spain, where children made bread, that the classrooms were of colors that were neither white nor gray nor green to which we are accustomed [. . .] the children painted with wonderful watercolors. [. . .] I’m talking about a time when Spain was still very gray” (Rosario Sanz, mother of a child who attended a Waldorf School, personal communication, 16 January 2014).

An interesting matter here is how Waldorf pedagogy was adopted in Spain and how it has been evolving over time. To that end, the classification that Ida Oberman establishes and that Neil Boland has gathered in his work *The Globalization of Steiner Education: Some considerations* can be used as a reference regarding the existence of different approaches to Steiner's ideas. In Oberman's classification, approaches can be considered as purist, accommodationist, or evolutionist (Oberman in Boland, 2015, p. 197). In the case of Spain, the origins were mainly purist. This approach is characterised by faithfully following Steiner's model as applied in Germany. This was how the Waldorf movement was initially adopted in Spain. Teachers went mainly to Germany for training, although some went to France instead. A key publication was the newsletter *Boletín de Metodología para los presentes y futuros maestros Waldorf* [Methodology Newsletter for Present and Future Waldorf Teachers], edited by Juan Berlín, alumnus of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart. This *Boletín* was received and thoughtfully read in Spanish circles willing to implement Waldorf education.<sup>13</sup> Among its contents were important Steiner conferences and texts from key participants in the movement. These contents contributed to the newsletter being perceived as a very valuable and trustworthy material among readers, especially since in it were collected texts of the genuine German Waldorf education (Quiroga, 2019, pp. 218–219). Over time, the presence of Waldorf pedagogy increased in different countries and began shifting towards a purist approach with an evolutionist tendency that held to Steiner's outline but with major updates and adaptations to the characteristics of each cultural context.

Even so, an issue on which the *Asociación de Centros Educativos Waldorf* [Association of Waldorf Educational Centers] of Spain has focused its efforts in recent years concerns how Waldorf undertakings fit in with the Spanish legal framework. Steiner himself noted that Waldorf schools should be integrated within a legal framework and not be constituted outside the laws of a country and society in which they carry out their pedagogic work. Here it should be mentioned that all Waldorf schools in Spain are currently accredited by the *Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports* and issue the same school certificates to their students as any other public, chartered, or private school.

In Spain today, nearly all the Waldorf schools have opted to be privately owned. Private schools have greater autonomy regarding official requirements, which directly affects the hiring of teachers, selection of students, and the structure of the curriculum.<sup>14</sup> Again, this was a concern for Steiner in

13 In Antonio Malagón's words (one of the pioneers of anthroposophy and Waldorf education in Spain): "We received several issues per year and it was pure gold" (personal communication, 21 January 2014).

14 In this sense, it is interesting to bring up the conclusions gathered by Marta Sierra, the Spanish representative for the ECSWE after the meeting held in January 2006 in Amsterdam: "In much

1919, who from the start aspired to having the *Freie Waldorfschule* [Free Waldorf School] be “free” in the sense of not depending on any political institution in consonance with the principles of Social Threefolding. Private ownership grants schools greater autonomy – despite their being subject to inspections that minimise the chances of carrying out a wholly independent pedagogical project – but has the drawback of making schools financially accessible to only some sectors of the population.

Most Waldorf schools in Spain choose private ownership mainly due to two factors. One is related to the variability of the conditions set out in the different state or regional education policies. In the Spanish context, it is easy to find important differences regarding this issue among regions. The other has to do with the admission cut-off criteria for students to enrol.<sup>15</sup> The moment Waldorf schools were to accept State funding, they would be subject to State criteria for admissions cut-offs. In that case, they would not be able to prioritise admitting a student whose family lives farther away but who has a certain commitment to Waldorf pedagogy over one from a family living nearer the school but for whom pedagogy ideals held no particular relevance. This last factor would not be a problem for small schools that can cover the demand, but it becomes a dilemma for schools where the number of applicants exceeds their real possibilities.

One of the greatest drawbacks is the financial hardship some schools must face, especially newer ones. This fact has a direct effect on teacher wages, which are usually lower than those at public schools, and may even jeopardise the feasibility of the projects. In addition, economic meltdowns such as that of 2008 make these schools more vulnerable should families no longer be able to afford sending their children to private school. Nevertheless, there are two singular schools in the context of Spain as mentioned previously: the *Escuela Infantil Waldorf El Moral* [Waldorf El Moral Nursery School] and the *Geroa Eskola – Escuela Libre* [Geroa Eskola – Free School] that receive State funding.<sup>16</sup>

There are currently a total of 33 Waldorf schools throughout the country. This figure includes kindergartens as well as schools also offering primary

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of Europe Waldorf schools are subsidized and also have much more freedom than us. What shocked my colleagues a lot is the contradiction of being a movement that in Spain it is 100% private and yet controlled almost as if we were public schools. “For them you can be a private school with the advantage of having almost absolute freedom (curriculum, qualifications (. . .) or you are subsidized with the inconvenience of having to abide by certain rules. So your situation is very hard. This is something worth fighting for” (Marta Sierra, 2006, p. 31).

15 Public schools have an admission criteria that has to do with proximity. This means that families who live close to the school get a point in their final score. The families that get more points are the ones whose children get a place at a selected school.

16 In Spain, schools can be owned publicly, privately, or as chartered concessions. Public schools are fully funded by the State. Chartered concession schools are created by private initiative and have mixed funding, partly from the State. Private schools are funded exclusively from private funds.

and secondary education (Waldorf-Steiner Educación, 2022, pp. 5–6). In addition, internationally, Waldorf education is represented in organisations such as the *European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education* (ECSWE) and *International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education* (IASWECE), while closely connected to the *Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum*, since its two directors both lecture at teacher training courses within one of the Section's lines of action regarding teacher training.

Furthermore, a space where the presence of this pedagogic movement has recently begun to grow is the internet. All the schools have a website with information on aspects of Waldorf pedagogy. The extent and depth of their explanation differs from school to school, although a common lack in most of them is a failure to outline their anthroposophic underpinnings and to provide more specific features of their curriculum.<sup>17</sup> Granted, educational settings generally do not make use of technological resources to present themselves in any great depth. The schools are more inclined to share the pedagogic aspects of their teaching in spaces of trust with people and families who approach the school on open house days or at the training courses themselves on Waldorf pedagogy.

## Conclusions

This chapter has analysed the rollout of Waldorf pedagogy in Spain. One of the salient points is that, even though more Waldorf schools are open today in practically every region of the country, the theoretical foundation of these schools is still largely unknown. Therefore, the first element analysed is the presence of Waldorf pedagogy in public and academic discourse. Roughly speaking, Waldorf pedagogy is known in Spain as an alternative model of education characterised mainly by the development of a teaching methodology that is more appealing to learners. It is true that although public discourse and the media show more superficial aspects of this pedagogy, in academic circles there is a growing interest in studying its theoretical and historical underpinnings. This fact can be seen in the increase in research and publications on Waldorf pedagogy over the last decade. Moreover, the schools themselves are looking for ways to spread the word on the specifics of the methodology used in their classrooms, although most of the texts are written for the general public.

One characteristic phenomenon in Spain of how Waldorf pedagogy is perceived is that by merely mentioning its being an esoterically based model of

17 This can be seen in the websites of many schools. I put some examples of the three major Waldorf schools in Spain: *Escuela Libre Micael* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230802145120/www.escuelamicael.com/en>, memento from 2 August 2023), *Escola Waldorf El Tiller* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230802145232/https://escolawaldorf.org/>, memento from 2 August 2023), and *Escuela Waldorf Meniñeiros* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230802145244/https://escuelawaldorf-lugo.org/>, memento from August 2023).

education, its pedagogy loses credibility. This matter was analysed in the second section. In a country with a strong Catholic background, where debate on education has traditionally been polarised between secularism and Catholicism, many people are sceptical about esotericism, and more so in education, where rationalism and scientificism have become consolidated as hegemonic paradigms. Moreover, Waldorf pedagogy is catalogued as one of the growing number of “alternative pedagogies” gaining interest. Added to that is the fact that any model of education deemed “alternative” in Spain a priori implies a secular nature. This is the general impression, although it is important to bear in mind that there are other families for whom its religious convictions or preliminary approach to esoteric questions makes Waldorf pedagogy ideal.

Lastly, an analysis was offered of how the psychologistic and technicistic shift in education over the last 50 years has contributed to Waldorf pedagogy being conceptualised in Spain as an “alternative pedagogy” of increasing greater appeal. Elements as characteristic as its ecological perspective, the presence of natural materials, and the noticeable artistic component applied to its didactics are enough to set it apart from more official lines of education. Waldorf schools are mainly privately owned, with the families paying for the entire cost of the fees. This modality allows the schools to develop a curriculum as faithful as possible to the model of education created by Steiner while also facing the drawback of making Waldorf pedagogy affordable only to some of the population. Even so, Waldorf pedagogy has reached a considerable level of development and implementation in the last two decades. Its ability to channel the aspirations and wishes of families in search of educational spaces for their children far removed from the paradigm of standardisation is one of the main reasons for its growing popularity during its short history in the Spanish context.

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# 4 School of Imagination, School of Threats

## Discourses around the Waldorf School in Poland

*Maja Dobiasz-Krysiak*

### Introduction

The story about Waldorf schools in Poland goes down a bumpy path. Although the origins of Polish Waldorf-oriented thought go back as far as a 100 years ago, it was heavily marked with the socio-political events and the changes that Polish society underwent, meandering between openness to the new and conservative fear of the unknown. In this article, I attempt to present the most important factors that summarise the closeness and strangeness of the Waldorf school to the dominant culture manifested in public and academic discourses. I will focus on the moments of integration and segregation of the Waldorf school in the educational system and the Polish culture changing over the last 40 years.

The time frame of the Waldorf presence in Poland starts in the 1920s, simultaneously to the beginnings of the Waldorf movement worldwide. Before the Second World War, it was a concept developed in anthroposophical milieus. The social conditions for absorbing the trend were quite favourable thanks to the openness of intellectual circles to the esoteric fashions and their relatively good connections with foreign intellectual and artistic environment, mainly thanks to anthroposophical painters Wiga Siedlecka and Luna Drexler.<sup>1</sup> Another favourable factor was the emergence of the New School Movement that established Waldorf schools in the field of interests of Polish pedagogues. It was also triggered by the desire to create a Polish theory of the Steiner school referring to the ancient roots of European culture and humanistic values. Pre-war anthroposophists were members of the bourgeois and Bohemian culture, so the Waldorf interests did not go beyond the framework of the upper class. The development of the idea was disturbed by the war and by the new social order that emerged after that. The communist times were unfavourable for any signs of class privilege such as esoteric traditions, as well as for any initiatives associated with Germany and the West.

1 Read more about the initiatives about Polish pre-war artists: Dobiasz-Krysiak, M. (2015). Polish enigma. In R. J. David & D. Voda (Eds.), *Enigma: One hundred years of anthroposophical art*. Arbor Vitae.

The memory of the anthroposophical movement was kept in private circles that developed separate visions of Polish anthroposophy.<sup>2</sup> Many people associated the esoteric organisational secrecy with the fear of interest from the security services since the persecution and arrest of anthroposophist Robert Walter in the 1950s (Majorek, n.d.).

The second beginning of the Waldorf movement was characterised by the political transformation of 1989, the introduction of democracy, and the emergence of middle-class and popular interests in New Age and psychotronics<sup>3</sup> that constitute the conditions under which the founding of the school was possible. The centre of gravity of this research is the turn of the 1980s/1990s. As an anthropologist, I consider this liminal moment as the most interesting due to the accumulation of culture-forming phenomena and discourses that accompanied the most intensive development of the Polish Waldorf school. The democratic breakthrough, as every crisis of culture, created a microclimate favouring the emergence of new cultural trends but also causing the disturbance of existing authorities and social unrest. It has been recorded on the black pages of the history of the Waldorf school in Poland, reflecting in its present functioning, which I recapitulate in the last section.

The text is therefore organised in a diachronic manner, beginning with the section “The Liminal Times: Readaptation of Waldorf at the Turn of the 1980s and 1990s.” It starts with the re-emergence of Waldorf in the Polish and German press as well as the similarity in the values of Waldorf and of other new Polish schools. I discuss the fears and hopes of the school’s Western and European inclinations, and finally I focus on the relations between emerging Waldorf schools and the Polish educational social movement and its “Solidarity”-oriented identity. The article finishes with the chapter “Becoming an Educational Alien: Practices of Othering Waldorf in Poland,” tackling the crisis of the Waldorf school caused by the interest of the Catholic Church in the school and the other factors, leaving a long shadow on this educational alternative till now.

The research was conducted in the years 2014–2018 for the sake of the doctoral thesis I defended in 2019 at the *Institute for Polish Culture, Warsaw University* and partly within the individual scientific grant financed by the *National Science Center* in Poland. The findings were published by *Impuls Publishing House* in 2021 as a monograph book entitled *School of Transformation: About Waldorf School in the times of democratic breakthrough*

2 Read more about the pre-war history of Polish Waldorf movement and its public reception: Dobiasz-Krysiak, M. (2021). *Szkola transformacji. O szkole waldorfskiej w dobie przełomu demokratycznego* [The School of Transformation: On the Waldorf School in the age of democratic transition]. Impuls.

3 Psychotronics – an Eastern European name for an interdisciplinary research discipline tackling various phenomena that have not yet been explored or categorically rejected by science. Created in 1973 at the 1st *International Congress of Psychotronic Research* in Prague, Czech Republic.

(Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2021). The research methods were archival and ethnographic. I conducted archival and library queries in *Goetheanum* in Dornach, Switzerland, as well as in Poland, in Jerzy Prokopiuk's,<sup>4</sup> among other private archives. The historical research was conducted as a part of the interdisciplinary, nationwide project *Polish Culture and Western Esoteric Philosophy in the Years 1890–1939* financed by the *Ministry of Science and Higher Education* in Poland (2015–2019) and led by Professor Monika Rzczycka (*University of Gdańsk*). Furthermore, I have also conducted 50 interviews with members of the Waldorf movement: teachers, parents, and Waldorf alumni. I have visited most of the Polish schools and preschools, and I have conducted longer ethnographic observations in Waldorf schools in Warsaw and Berlin, Germany. In this article, I focus on the aspects of the research concerning reputation and discussion on the Waldorf school in the academic and public circles.

### The Liminal Times: Readaptation of Waldorf at the Turn of the 1980s and 1990s

#### *“School of Imagination”: Return of the Waldorf School*

The post-war history of the Waldorf movement in Poland is closely associated with the person of Jerzy Prokopiuk, a writer and translator who introduced various elements of anthroposophical culture to Poland from the late 1970s. He interested himself with agriculture, eurythmy, and Waldorf pedagogy, initiating a group for interested people in the *Institute of Psychotronics* in the 1980s and organising a pedagogical group for 25 young mothers in Warsaw's Ursynów district (Neider, 1984, p. 793). As a translator, he made foreign contacts and travelled a lot in the times of the People's Republic of Poland, looking for anthroposophic acquaintances.

This is one of the reasons why he became the hero of one of the first articles about Poland in the anthroposophical press. In April 1984, *Info3* published an extensive interview with him, entitled *Anthroposophie in Polen: Interview mit Dr. Jerzy Prokopiuk* [Anthroposophy in Poland: Interview with Dr. Jerzy Prokopiuk] (Zoller, 1984), in which he mentions pre-war anthroposophist Wiga Siedlecka and also talks about the recently deceased Robert Walter, persecuted by the communist regime. Much of the conversation concerns the activities undertaken by Prokopiuk – the lecture on anthroposophy at the *Wolna Wszecznica Polska* in September 1981, which initiated his independent activity, followed by the formation of a group of enthusiasts, the introduction of 1970s biodynamic management and eurythmic performances organised with the help of Rendsburg's teacher of eurythmy, Arfst Wagner (Zoller, 1984, pp. 11–13).

4 Jerzy Prokopiuk (1931–1921), promoter of Polish Waldorf movement since the 1980s, anthroposophist, historian of esoteric movement, writer, and translator.

What is important, Prokopiuk emphasises that anthroposophy in Poland exists as a free spirit in the form of initiatives and not – “God forbid” – an organisation or society, explaining this by the communist regime on the one hand and Polish Catholicism on the other. The motto of his speech becomes the sentence “*Wir wollen das werdende, nicht das Gewordene übernehmen*” [“We want to become, not take over what is found”], which, in my opinion, both perfectly summarises Prokopiuk’s anti-institutional intentions and foreshadows the nature of the upcoming decade in Polish anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy.

Thanks to the activity of Jerzy Prokopiuk and people from his circle, anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy in Poland may owe first of all a renewed reception, but also a strong inclusion in the New Age trend. Already in the first issue of the magazine *3 Eye: Psychotronic Bulletin*, various anthroposophy-related topics were discussed; for example, Prokopiuk published an article on biodynamic agriculture. The text developed into a series continued in three issues of the journal. In the ensuing numbers, he introduced the character of Robert Walter. Jerzy Prokopiuk writes his biography, followed by the publication of several articles about the magic of Walter – a great initiate. The second, after agriculture, element of anthroposophic culture popularised in the magazine is pedagogy. Prokopiuk publishes an extensive article *Secrets of a Child*, concerning the development of the human being and the influence of the modern world on its upbringing, which can be considered one of the earliest texts on the anthroposophical foundations of Waldorf pedagogy (Prokopiuk, 1985, pp. 4–14). The sixth issue of 1985 is devoted to a large extent to Steiner, and Antoni Borowiec, in the text entitled *Schools without marks*, writes about the beginnings, goals and basic methodological principles of Waldorf schools, teacher training in Stuttgart, as well as the relations between the international Waldorf movement and state schools (Borowiec, 1985, pp. 6–11). In the next issue, Leszek Matela, in the article *Understanding a child*, presents the writings of Steiner and Caroline von Heydebrand (who became famous in the field of Waldorf special education), most of which have not yet been translated into Polish (Matela, 1985, pp. 13–18). The most interesting, as an attempt at an emic analysis of the changes in contemporary reality, seems to be Prokopiuk’s article *Paradigm of imagination*, in which he writes:

The paradigm of imagination – a vision of the world, the actual birth of which falls on the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century – is a synthesis [. . .] of old gnosis and young science. As such, the imaginative paradigm is a holistic vision of the world, an attempt to grasp the macrocosm and microcosm, the spiritual cosmos, and the material cosmos as a whole.

(Prokopiuk, 1986, p. 4)

As representatives of this paradigm, Prokopiuk mentions Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Novalis, and the Poles Juliusz Słowacki, August Cieszkowski, and Bronisław Trentowski, and ends with Rudolf Steiner. He considers the works

of Sigmund Freud, Karl-Gustav Jung, Erich Fromm, humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, psychotronics and representatives of the New Age movement as manifestations of the paradigm of imagination. As if in reference to and as a development of this perspective, in 1988 Tadeusz Doktór, a religious studies scholar, included in *3 Eye* a series *Schools of Imagination* devoted to Steiner's Waldorf pedagogy, which was published in episodes from issues six to eight. This long text once again presents the pedagogical assumptions, analyses the example of *Hibernia School* in Germany, and even reaches back to the Polish, pre-war reception of Waldorf schools.<sup>5</sup> This way of writing about school in the years preceding its actual presence in Poland reveals the hopes attached to it by the authors of *3 Eye*, a school of imagination in the times of the paradigm of the same name, it is a school corresponding to the character of a new era that is happening right now. A time that develops and needs an education grounded in the new type of spirituality.

The year 1984 was also a real penetration of Waldorf pedagogy into the Polish mainstream. In September of that year, the national newspaper *Polityka* [Politics] published a long article by Adam Krzemiński on the *Free School of Waldorf*.<sup>6</sup> Krzemiński – a Germanist and specialist in Polish–German relations and privately acquainted with Prokopiuk (2004, p. 84) – travelled around many Waldorf schools and talked to Waldorf parents from Göttingen, Hanover, and Stockholm. Although his article critically analyses the place of Waldorf graduates in the labour market, he presents Waldorf pedagogy as a real and interesting alternative to “authoritarian pedagogy” in Poland. He writes about Waldorf schools in Germany:

Today, it is difficult to get into these schools, so it happens that parents create civic initiatives, build new schools out of their own pocket, engage teachers, and participate in the development of curricula. Pedagogical enclaves are expanding, which in truth will not replace the state system, but clearly indicate its deficiency.

(Krzemiński, 1984b, p. 3)

The author is interested in the readiness to “change the world” brought by these schools and admits that looking at some school amenities or projects “you can turn green with envy” (Krzemiński, 1984b, p. 3). The mere fact that the article was published in the party-oriented *Polityka* caused quite a stir

5 He quotes an article by Józef Mirski: *Anthroposophical educational system* from the pre-war magazine *Ruch Pedagogiczny* [Pedagogical Movement] but gives the year of its publication incorrectly – 1939 instead of 1932. Mirski J. (1932). Antropozoficzny system wychowawczy. *Ruch Pedagogiczny*, 201–210.

6 The article *Free School of Waldorf* published as: Krzemiński, A. (1984a). Wolna szkoła Waldorfa. *Polityka*, 37(1428), 3, was translated and reprinted in December 1984 by anthroposophical magazine *Info3* under the title *Waldorfpädagogik in Polen? Man könnte grün werden von Neid* [Waldorf education in Poland? You could turn green with envy]. *Info3*, 12, 14–16.

among Poles interested in Waldorf pedagogy. It also resonated among Western Waldorf communities, as suggested by the comment in *Info3* by Beata Kita, who was working on establishing a Waldorf school in Poland (1984, p. 14). Andreas Neider even wrote an article about it in the most important Waldorf magazine *Erziehungskunst*, where he publishes a German summary of the article and writes about Prokopiuk's pedagogical activity (Neider, 1984, p. 793). The year 1984 can be called a real breakthrough when it comes to Polish interest in Waldorf pedagogy but also when it comes to Poland's presence in the anthroposophic press. In *Goetheanum Worldwide*, Eduard Najlepszy's text *Ein Brief aus Polen* [Letter from Poland] also appears at that time, addressing the very characteristic theme of Poland as a place in process, where people constantly have to improvise, negotiate their identity between Catholicism, socialism, and a jealous view of the West. This processuality makes them a land of the middle (Najlepszy, 1984, p. 149). This is an important theme for the Waldorf movement, also exploited by anthroposophical interests in Poland in order to find cultural and spiritual balance, the *aurea mediocritas*, as well as geographic balance (Lubienski et al., 1989).

Prokopiuk's idea of becoming, not taking over what is found, can be interpreted in two ways. First, consider the title of the journal *Das Werdende Zeitalter* [The Epoch of Becoming], which is the central organ of the *International League of New Education* founded in Calais. Second, the processual understanding of new times expressed in this way leads to the understanding of this statement as characteristic of the phenomena of democratic breakthrough, which is characterised by temporal changes defined by sociologist Elzbieta Tarkowska as "the fall of the idea of progress, replaced by the idea of continuous, incessant change" (Tarkowska, 1993, p. 94). We didn't have to wait long for reactions from Poland. A year later, in *Goetheanum Worldwide*, Konrad Rudnicki, an astronomer and Mariavite priest who represented the "old school" of Polish anthroposophists, wrote a correction to the famous interview. First of all, he denied the rumours that Prokopiuk had a PhD, pointed out that he was not a leading figure in Poland, and that he practiced anthroposophy a peculiar way. Rudnicki has nothing against making foreign acquaintances, but he emphasises the importance of individual work of individual people as well as the specificity and holisticity of this philosophy. Regardless of the progressive ambitions of the fringe currents, Polish anthroposophists of the old school felt the need for progress and wanted to institutionalise the movement, which was fully possible only after June 1989.

### *Converging Voices: "Solidarity," Education, Manifestos*

The 1980s were a time of slow opening not only of the anthroposophical or Waldorf movement but also the beginning of changes for the socialisation of the school in a centrally planned socialist system. These changes are an important context for the emergence of the Waldorf school movement in Poland and for enabling it to exist. They constitute a founding context, accepting it

in the name of democratic pluralism and as a coalition opposing the same enemy.

In 1980–1981, before the introduction of martial law,<sup>7</sup> “Solidarity” movement made the first attempts to talk to the authorities about the shape and the role of education. As early as 1985, pedagogue Zbigniew Kwieciński called this period the time of birth of the social educational movement, based not so much on an attempt to introduce pedagogical innovations into school practice but precisely based on the conflict “between the interests of the authorities and the interests of society and individual citizens” (Kwieciński, 1985, p. 6). As Kwieciński writes:

In contrast to the state-stated way of education development – sick, pathological, excessively ‘nationalizing’ a human being, the other one, in which society participates in defining goals and methods of implementation and participates in the implementation of the adopted goals, we will call socialized, humanistic education. When a great social conflict broke out in Poland in the summer of 1980, as a result, the hitherto hidden manipulation of people was exposed, including the use of education as a tool of addiction to the ‘sick’ vision and the pathological control center of the state. There was also demand for such a socialized and humanistic education (i.e. education in the broadest sense – and within it a school – serving the maximum development of all people and every person).

(Kwieciński, 1985, p. 6)

In the first issue of the multi-monthly *Edukacja i Dialog* [Education and Dialogue] from September 1985 (a magazine issued by the emerging social educational movement), there was a teacher’s manifesto from before December 1981 – *School as educational environment* – which was an appeal to restore schools to the student, its main recipient. In the first sentences of this document one can find a lot of diagnoses and categories taken from humanistic psychology:

The school is for the child. [. . .] The school serves the child when it creates opportunities for the development of his individual abilities, when it supports his self-realization process. The school serves the child when it promotes the growth of his body and mind, the development of his talents, imagination, and emotionality. School does not serve a child when it inhibits his physical, mental, and spiritual development.

(Sprzed grudnia 81, 1985, p. 2)

<sup>7</sup> Martial law in Poland was a drastic restriction of everyday life that lasted from 13 December 1981 to 22 July 1983. The communist government introduced martial law to counter the Solidarity movement, under the propaganda argument to cease an armed intervention from the Soviet Army.



This quote is crucial for my considerations because it contains the values postulated by the pre-breakthrough social movements, for which the oppositionists still want to fight despite the gap caused by martial law. These values make up a fully humanistic image of a human being, even if it is “just” a child. Even more of them can be found explicitly in the editorial section, where pedagogue Julian Radziewicz reveals the goals of the magazine.

Ultimately, we want to socialize Polish education. We also want to find a way to save the contemporary generation of Polish youth from political, moral, social and intellectual demoralization. Moreover, (which is not the least important) we want to find and use the connections between the present and the best democratic educational traditions. We are very attached to such words (and their content) as democracy, tolerance, political and ideological pluralism, freedom, autonomy, self-governance, socialization, love, responsibility, common sense, human subjectivity, and the rule of law. We are only interested in the sense and ‘applicability’ of these concepts, not their sound attractiveness. We are with ‘Solidarity’.

(Radziewicz, 1985, p. 2)

The editor clearly emphasises what values are the guidelines, thus expressing a disagreement with the rhetoric of the times. In defence of the same values and in a similar tone, a text is written that can be considered a Waldorf manifesto in Poland. In the first issue of *Primula* [Primrose] – a newspaper of the Waldorf school founded in 1992 in Warsaw – the editors published a fragment of Rudolf Steiner’s speech delivered to the first teachers in Stuttgart in 1919. Although the fragment concerns the historical reality and the German political situation, it is chosen to surprise readers (parents and teachers) with its timeliness:

The learning objectives are given to us by the state. They are the worst imaginable and education is built on them. The very politics and political activity prove that people are treated according to patterns and that they try to apply people even more to patterns. [. . .] An example and a foretaste of this is the Russian Bolshevik educational system, which is really a cemetery for the real essence of education. We’re going to have to fight hard against that, and we’ve got to do it. [. . .] In our teachers’ republic there will be no place to rest, we will not have regulations from the authorities, but we will bring what everyone carries inside. [. . .] We do not want to turn the Waldorf school into an ideological school. The Waldorf school should not be an ideological school in which children are stuffed with anthroposophical dogma. [. . .] We must be aware of our enormous task. We cannot be only educators, but we must be people of culture at the highest level, in the full sense of the word.

(Steiner, 1993, pp. 2–3)



What is important here is the revolutionary nature of the utterances, encouraging teachers to do their didactic work as if they were fighting. It is a quote full of military metaphors, placing the school in the centre of social conflicts and presenting teachers as emissaries of change. Waldorf educators are the initiators of not only an educational but also a cultural movement, a social movement fighting against the politicisation and ideologisation of education, which is particularly important when referring to Bolshevism, which in 1993 (the year the last units of the Northern Group of Forces of the Soviet Army left the territory of Poland) is almost synonymous with the Soviet Union and the Polish People's Republic. The alternative is to be a new school and political system – a republic, the construction of which is, however, a difficult task full of sacrifices, requiring personal commitment. Using this fragment from Steiner, the new Waldorf school in Poland very precisely positioned itself in the socio-educational landscape of the time and clearly opted for a socialised and depoliticised education, thus inscribing itself in the continuum of phenomena creating the social educational movement in Poland during the democratic breakthrough.

#### *Deep Culture Against McDonaldisation*

The condition for the emergence and return of the Waldorf school to Poland after 45 years of the hidden period (Prokopiuk, 2003, p. 218) was related to opening the western border. The school was atypical of Polish social educational movement because, unlike other schools, its organisational, programme, and ideological content was imported from the West, specifically from Germany, a country figuring for decades as an enemy. In addition, it had esoteric roots that were rather unpopular interests in communist times, reaching only alternative circles. For Waldorf parents, more important than anthroposophy was founding a school for their children understood as an act of freedom, democracy, and a clear turn towards European values, humanism, and pluralism. It was also a component of an emerging new social class structure in Poland, since the 1990s are seen as the birth of the middle and higher classes and its differentiation practices reflected in lifestyle and consumption.

My interlocutors at the time of setting up the school at the beginning of the political transformation seem to emphasise the need for class homology understood as a turn towards “deep culture,” which would prepare young people for a clash with the popular culture of the West and America and the trend of McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 2003; Melosik, 2003 pp. 24–25). The fear of falling into another dependency on dominant cultural patterns – this time Western–American – also appears in the stories of my interlocutors. Concern about forcing children into market mechanisms, subjecting them to the lobby of an easily accessible culture that will have a destructive effect on their innate curiosity of the world, becomes one of the arguments for creating a school that will be able to oppose it.

“Deep culture” may be defined as the values and content present in the myths and philosophy underlying the European identity, i.e. in the ancient sources of culture, which still influence the multiplicity of national cultures of the old continent. The reading of myths is present in the curriculum of Waldorf schools (Greek, Germanic, Slavic), and they also appear in the form of an analysis of fairy tales from this region of Europe. In the statements of my interlocutors, one can also find other, scattered signals of what was considered to be “deep”: the attitude towards the relationship between nature and culture (celebration of cyclical time, annual and Christian holidays), and a turn towards traditional culture and professions (the course *From Grain to Bread*, where children learn through experience the origin and production of bread, a cycle held in the third grade: *Building a house* or the course *Old crafts and professions*). There are also echoes recognised by Poles of the mythologisation of the areas behind the Iron Curtain by Western Europe and of the disappointment with the effects of capitalism, environmental degradation, and a rather naïve hope for opening “unspoilt” agricultural areas and minds uncontaminated by pop culture.

Scholars sympathetic to the idea of Waldorf schools wanted to emphasise its philosophical roots. Michał Gładzewski, a pedagogue and researcher who dutifully noted the importance of Steiner for the philosophy of science, writes that Steiner’s social idea was a continuation of the thought of Plato, St. Augustine, Hobbes, and Spencer (Gładzewski, 1996, p. 51). Grzegorz Szulczewski, a philosophy professor at the *Warsaw School of Economics* and a Waldorf father, in an article from 1997 analysed the relationship between Waldorf pedagogy and anthroposophy in the light of European philosophical traditions (Szulczewski, 1997, p. 159). He notices the contemporary separation of pedagogy and philosophy, which in antiquity was its intellectual basis. Since the times of Kant, the philosophy of man has been pushed to the margins in favour of transcendental philosophy, and attempts to abolish this opposition were made only in the 20th century. Szulczewski refers to the personalism of Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, Otto Friedrich Bollnow, and Odo Marquard and to the turn of philosophy towards pedagogy that he calls “transcendental-anthropological philosophy.” He considers Waldorf education inspired by anthroposophy to be a unique example of combining philosophical thought and pedagogy. He strongly emphasises the relationship between the Waldorf school and the intellectual, spiritual, and philosophical tradition of Europe. Thus he gives it a place in the chain of successive philosophical currents, noting, however, its separateness, resulting from turning away from the dominant rationalistic or materialistic tendency. Deriving anthroposophy from Plato’s Paideia, it legitimises not so much Steiner’s content as the legitimacy of its presence in this part of the world. Although the text is not written to evaluate Steiner’s thought, it conveys a message that situates Waldorf pedagogy on the side of “deep culture,” referring to the highest European traditions of thought and the deepest humanistic moral values.

*European Freedoms*

Another way of rooting Waldorf in dominant narratives was referring to its “free” character. Building the school’s identity on a fairly neutral ground was to include the Waldorf school in European educational trends. Such narratives are present in the publication *European perspectives of pluralism in education*, edited by Professor Maria Ziemska, who cared about the image of Waldorf pedagogy in the dominant discourse society and who introduced its content stemming from anthroposophy in a rather veiled way. She introduced a Waldorf teacher training study to *Warsaw University*, so her motives were tactical, aimed at legitimising the narrative about free schools in Poland with the recognition and recommendations of European bodies that could be a fairly objective point of reference.

A book published in the year 2000 summarises the international conference organised in April 1992 in Warsaw. The topic was freedom in education and the activities of the *European Forum for Freedom in Education*, whose founders were associated with Waldorf pedagogy. The conference was part of a series of meetings between Forum members and educators from Central and Eastern Europe, which were currently undergoing political transformation. Similar meetings were held in 1992–1994 in Bucharest, Budapest, Tallinn, Zagreb, and St. Petersburg (Ziemska, 2000, p. 111). Freedom and the ways of understanding and practising it in schools in Western Europe were the topics organising the meeting, which in the book published eight years later summarised both respected Polish educators and academic sociologists – Małgorzata Żytka or Beata Łaciak, as well as people practically organising socialised education in post-revolutionary Poland – Jerzy Starzyński from *Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oświatowe* [Social Educational Society] (STO) or Marek Kunicki-Goldfinger, adviser to Henryk Samsonowicz, the Minister of National Education and a Waldorf parent. The foreign professors invited to the publication are almost exclusively Waldorf educators, although this element of their identity is not emphasised anywhere. A Helsinki professor and founder of the *European Forum* Reijo Wilenius; a member of the *Social Section* at the *Goetheanum* Ingo Krampen; author and Waldorf teacher Johannes Kiersch; founder of the *Waldorf Pedagogy Institute* in Witten and the author of texts published in anthroposophical paper *Info3* Frank-Rüdiger Jach. Their articles are supplemented with declarations and recommendations of the *European Forum* on human rights to freedom in education and pluralism in the process of European unification, consistent and presented in the light of international declarations and conventions on the right to education and freedom in education – UNESCO and the *Council of Europe*.

The freedom conceptualised by Waldorf educators is identified with the freedoms defined by European organisations caring for equal access to education, counteracting discrimination, and the right to education, as well as respecting children’s and human rights. This type of equating foreign and difficult-to-assign Waldorf ideas with European values, defined by prestigious

groups, undoubtedly proves the need to legitimise the former by assigning them to a wider, ideological circle of values. Thanks to this, Waldorf mimicry is understood more broadly – not only as an imitation of the German alternative but above all as a practical implementation of education at the European level, and a retreat from the Soviet-Union-oriented school towards a school shaped by a free Europe.

### *A Melting Pot: Waldorf and STO*

Although the goal of Polish democratic changes was pluralism, the main player was the *Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oświatowe* [Social Educational Society] (STO), which had been registered since 1987. It served as an umbrella organisation offering organisational help for many independent educational initiatives and was undoubtedly the forerunner of changes. The society, whose chair for many years was Wojciech Starzyński, operates as an NGO forming posts scattered around Poland that can establish social schools. Thanks to STO, various social schools were established. The society did not impose an ideological framework, only an organisational one – the school was to be established by the teachers and parents. As part of the STO Ewa Borgosz ran a first social school with Waldorf elements (Brüll, 1991, p. 113).

It seems that initially these environments overlapped, and it was difficult to draw a clear boundary between them. Waldorf melted for a moment in a pot full of different alternatives forming an educational social movement sharing the same humanistic values. The photo of the president of STO, Wojciech Starzyński, and the headmistress of the STO school with Waldorf educational elements, Ewa Borgosz, appears as an illustration of an initial article in *Info3* by Ramon Brüll, *Schulbeginn in Osteuropa* [Start of school in Eastern Europe], reporting on the development of Waldorf education in the region (Brüll, 1991, p. 113).

Members of the social educational movement were also interested in Waldorf pedagogy. Since 1990, numerous articles on this subject have been published in the magazine *Education and Dialogue* under the patronage of STO. In addition to the above-mentioned article by Tadeusz Doktor, *Parareligious movements on educational motives*, the same year also saw the publication of an interview with a researcher of German Waldorf pedagogy, Michał Narzekalak (later publishing as Michał Głazewski), entitled *Upbringing to freedom* (Narzekalak, 1990, pp. 7–11), and a text by Maria Giez, *Schools for our children*, in which the author reports on a meeting of social schools in the church in Zaspá, important for “Solidarity” in Gdańsk (where in 1987 Pope John Paul II laid flowers at the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers), during which Maria Ziemska presented the idea of Waldorf schools (Giez, 1990, p. 3–4). In the 3/4 issue of 1991, Jerzy Prokopiuk published an article *Pedagogics by Rudolf Steiner*, and in the next issue, Ewa Borgosz described the signing by the president of STO Wojciech Starzyński and Maria Ziemska in 1990 in Helsinki: *Declaration of Human Rights to Freedom in*

*Education* (Borgosz, 1991, p. 13). The next issue looked at Waldorf education even more closely – a fragment of the book *Raising a Child from the Point of View of Rudolf's Spiritual Knowledge* was quoted (Steiner, 1991, pp. 31–38), together with a review of Steiner's book *Upbringing to Freedom* by his translator, Ewa Łyczewska, a Waldorf educator. In 1992, in addition to the report by Ewa Borgosz from the *Freedom in Education Forum* at the Waldorf teacher training seminar in Witten-Annem, Germany (Borgosz, 1992, pp. 39–42), an extensive article by Tadeusz Doktor, *Waldorf school as a social organism* (Doktor, 1992, pp. 42–47), and an enthusiastic interview with Maria Ziemska, *The First Steiner school*, reporting on the founding of the first Waldorf school in Warsaw (Więckowski, 1992, pp. 20–23), a number of articles followed, explaining the idea of this school: the shape and organisation of the Waldorf school, the account of the Waldorf teacher Maria Baranowska from her stay at the Waldorf school in Zeist, the Netherlands (Baranowska, 1992, pp. 26–28), and, interestingly, an extensive bibliography on alternative pedagogy, mainly Waldorf, comprising 27 articles published so far in Polish, as well as a few in German (Baranowska, pp. 24–28, 48–49).

STO also contributed to the promotion of Waldorf publications. With the help of *Solidarité France-Pologne*, it published one of the first Waldorf books by Polish authors, edited by Jerzy Prokopiuk, entitled *Upbringing without Fear: Steiner pedagogy*, which is the aftermath of a conference on Steiner pedagogy at the Norwid Theater in Jelenia Góra, organised with the help of a cult figure, Alina Obidniak – director of the theatre, friend of alternative theatre director and guru Jerzy Grotowski, and in 1990 deputy director of the centre named after him in Wrocław. The effect of the conference was also the Waldorf issue of *Solidarity Jeleniogórska* magazine from December 1989, which featured an extensive article by Irena Wyciślik *A priest and an artist*, whose title was supposed to refer to the teacher's attitude in a Waldorf school. An article reporting on the utopian vision of a school based on love and vocation appears right next to the encouragement of the "Solidarity" Committee in Jelenia Góra to establish an STO club and school, addressed to parents (Wyciślik, 1989, pp. 2, 9). Self-governing, socialised initiatives were to be a support and even an inspiration for each other, not a competition, both due to the scale of the phenomena and the identification with a common educational social movement.

### **Becoming an Educational Alien: Practices of Othering Waldorf in Poland**

#### *Costs of Independence: Waldorf without STO*

The absorptive ambitions of STO were, however, greater than Waldorf's willingness to integrate. My interlocutors, parents from the first Waldorf school in Warsaw, also recall their initial membership in STO. However, they established

a separate association for the purpose of opening a school in 1992 – the *Society for Rudolf Steiner Pedagogy Development*. This could have resulted from the Waldorf tradition – several associations running Waldorf kindergartens had already been registered. However, it could also be related to the desire to emphasise the specificity of the curriculum and the organisational distinctiveness of the Steiner school from other STO schools.

The authors of the sociological research published in 2009 on the transformations of STO as a social movement, however, note the tendency in this environment to the appropriation of history. STO identifies all educational changes in the era of the democratic breakthrough with the phenomena that emerged under its name. Deconstructing this narrative, Marcin Frybes and Marek Kunicki-Goldfinger write that before 1989 and before the establishment of the first formal board of STO, there were already many independent educational environments in various Polish cities (Frybes & Kunicki-Goldfinger, 2009, p. 93). When examining the identity of the movement, the authors note that there is a strong attachment to the claim that the STO movement derives directly from “Solidarity” and is its educational continuation. However, when examining the history of the movement, they conclude that the political and ideological identity of the members of the movement, its scattered circles, was extremely diverse, and, due to the relative freedom provided by the STO framework, one can rather talk about a kind of mythologisation attributing a dominant position to “Solidarity”-engaged activists (Frybes & Kunicki-Goldfinger, 2009, p. 37). This mythologisation is, of course, an essential element of building the identity of the movement, which today researchers define as something between “‘historical identity’ (no longer valid)” and “‘nostalgic identity’ (showing some frustration)” (Frybes & Kunicki-Goldfinger, 2009, p. 101). This mythologisation, however, had very specific consequences for those who decided to establish themselves separately, such as the Waldorf school.

STO seems to annex the “Solidarity” identity and deprive it of other schools that formed the movement. Almost all of my Waldorf interlocutors have “Solidarity” episodes behind them, they sympathised with the movement and participated in strikes, and the Waldorf school appeared in the “Solidarity” press just quoted. As a dominant social movement, “S.” was an obvious point of reference for social movements with other dominants, including educational ones, because the main motivation to transform educational institutions was not only methodical but civic. STO cared very much about its image and was the largest organisation within the movement displaying colonising character. Emphasising the importance of organisational culture and not developing an alternative school curriculum made STO an organisation that could embrace various school ideas, but that deprived them of their specificity. The strong “Solidarity” symbolism of the STO was reinforced by, for example, planning an invitation of the Polish Pope John Paul II or establishing *Lech Wałęsa Foundation* and then inviting such names as film director Andrzej Wajda, music composer Witold Lutosławski. or Minister



of Education Henryk Samsonowicz to the *Council of Founders* (Frybes & Kunicki-Goldfinger, 2009, p. 94). Despite the interest and support of other educational environments, STO controlled the educational scene by assuming the role of *spiritus movens* of democratic changes and placed other actors (as the Waldorf school who finally departed from it) in appropriately peripheral casts. It became the beginning of the differentiation between the “Solidarity”-oriented freedom fighters of STO and Waldorf, which, deprived of community support, had to fight its battles alone.

### *Waldorf School Contra Catholic Church*

My research shows that the most dynamic development of the Waldorf movement took place at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, in the liminal period of hope for change, before schools were even established, and in the short pioneering period. Shortly after that began a long struggle with the wave of criticism from the Catholic Church that also influenced academic discourse.

The first negative voices about Waldorf reached academia through a book, *German Pedagogy of Reforms: 1890–1933*, published in 1992 by a professor of education from *Warsaw University*, Miroslaw S. Szymański. The author writes explicitly that the “Waldorf-type school operates in bad faith” (Szymański, 1992, p. 174). It was, however, only a prelude to other critical voices, which were also taken care of by Szymański himself. Six years later, he translated a book by Martina Keyser and Paul-Albert Wagemann, *Wie frei ist die Waldorfschule: Geschichte und Praxis einer pädagogischen Utopie* [How Free Is Waldorf School: History and practice of pedagogical utopia]. The book was published by a central educational publishing house in Poland that reached a broad audience and shaped the common narrative about this school and contributed to its educational discrimination.<sup>8</sup> The book is a testimony given by non-anthroposophically oriented Waldorf teachers who were disillusioned with this system. Compared to other books, it is a rather in-depth look at the German Waldorf school – we can find there descriptions of school’s everyday life, an introduction to anthroposophy, as well as an attempt to read Waldorf meanings and an analysis of the function of the “spiritual” school atmosphere. However, the view of the school is quite one-sided and full of personal resentment. The authors emphasise the strong ideologisation of the school, call it a totalitarian institution, and describe it as a sect (Kayser & Wagemann, 1998, p. 141). In the 1990s, this category entered the pop culture vocabulary and became a handy argument warning against various “spiritual dangers,” expressing the sense of danger caused by the influx of foreign content, a characteristic of times of cultural chaos. However, apart from

<sup>8</sup> Due to a large publishing run, it is the most available Waldorf position in almost every pedagogical library in the country to the present.

the function of organising the world and dealing with what is foreign, the publishers of the book contributed to the consolidation of the negative image of Waldorf schools.

This book had its aftermath. Only a year after its publication, a conflict broke out near Poznań, described in 1999 by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Przybylska, 1999a, p. 3; Tucholski & Kuśmirek, 1999, p. 2; Przybylska, 1999b, p. 2). Parents from the town of Luboń, fearing the sectarian nature of this pedagogy, rebelled against the attempt by the headmistress of the kindergarten to introduce the Waldorf methodology in their institution, which resulted in the dismissal of the teacher and the return to conventional teaching methods.

Waldorf pedagogy in Poland was included by Catholic researchers in the New Age, understood as a conglomerate of phenomena that “blur the boundaries between good and evil, explaining the rejection of ‘ethical’ values with ‘tolerance’ aimed at ‘reconciling all religions,’” writes priest Andrzej Zwoliński (1994, p. 9), one of more popular opponents in the dispute between the Catholic Church and the Waldorf school. He believes that the seemingly peaceful face of the New Age leads to the dissolution of traditional values such as the nation and nation-states, altruism, or clear moral and ethical standards. The issues described by him in the 1994 book *Secret Power(les)* [Tajemne niemoce] (astrology, tarot, feminism, homosexuality, ecology, rock music, dreams, prophecies or “Waldorf pedagogy”) are supposed to be small tools leading to this goal. The latter is introduced in the second chapter of the book, entitled *Dolls without face*. The main field of attack becomes religious teaching in Waldorf schools, called “religion without [a] face” or “religion without God.” Misunderstanding of and disagreement with such an approach to spirituality give Zwoliński a number of associations and fears. Using the example of calling Christmas a “luminous holiday,” he interprets Waldorf spirituality as open to various threats, including totalitarian ones (Zwoliński, 1994, pp. 13–14). Zwoliński, however, does not give any examples of the practical Polish implementation of the Waldorf school in the text. He places it among the phenomena that in most cases are generally considered to be imported from “out of this world,” having their sources outside – in the *orbis exterior*, an undefined but dangerous space-time that breaks into the *orbis interior* through very specific, defined enemies. The main source of danger perceived by the priest is cosmopolitanism that threatens the ideological coherence of the world, problematising the binary oppositions of truth and falsehood, and putting to the test the intersubjectivism of world-view. It is also a fear of losing authority.

According to anthropologist Ludwik Stomma, the Church has shaped Polish folk knowledge about the world for years and thus contributed to class-related “vertical isolation” of consciousness. The researcher notes that the system of folk knowledge about the external world was based on preserving rather than breaking the structures of the mythical consciousness of the countryside (Stomma, 1979, p. 131). Undoubtedly, the years of the People’s Republic of Poland contributed to the isolation of Polish culture. The year



1989 can be interpreted as a symbolic opening to uncontrolled, fragmentary content, detached from the source context, reaching through the free market in the form of services and goods, as well as religious ideas. Their specific carriers are the cosmopolitan “left-wing intelligentsia” mentioned in Zwoliński’s text – whose views and sympathies are alien to and dangerous for national stability. The attitude of members of the Waldorf community to spirituality is also interesting in this context. In an article published in *Prymula*, preschool teachers write:

We would like to inform all those applying to our kindergarten that it is Christian in spirit. [. . .] During the few years of functioning of our kindergarten, we also had children of people of other faiths, Buddhists or practicing Judaism. It turned out that cooperation with them can be great. It was more important that both parties, i.e. the given family and the kindergarten, are on their way, that they are striving for God, than differences in the way they show Him reverence.

(Neumann & Stępniewska, 1998, p. 10)

The issue of the denominational nature of the Waldorf school was taken up at the same time by pedagogy professor Stanisław Kawula in a book published in Olsztyn in 1992 entitled *Alternative School: Waldorf schools – theory and practice*. On the basis of two popular Waldorf books by Christoph Lindenberg (1993) and Johannes Kiersch (2008), he creates an attachment *School without fear* with answers to frequently asked questions. In response to “Are Waldorf schools religiously neutral?” the author writes “No. All these schools emphasize the awakening of religious feelings in students. [. . .] There are no schools in Germany today where faith in God is as alive as in Waldorf schools.” It confirms that “according to the curriculum and as understood by the teachers,” they are Christian schools but with a reservation: “Whether those established in the Arab world, Israel or Japan, will retain their Christian character – only time will tell” (Kawula et al., 1992, pp. 67–68). To the next question, “Do anthroposophists have to be Christians?” Kawula replies:

No. There are also Buddhist and Jewish anthroposophists, as well as those who reject any form of belief in God. According the Rudolf Steiner Archive, the formula sounds: “The Anthroposophy pursued in the Goetheanum leads to results which can be of assistance to every human being – without distinction of nation, social standing or religion – acting as an incentive in spiritual life.”

(Kawula et al., 1992, p. 68)

Kawula’s approach was rather supportive to the Waldorf movement; however, it seems to be even more problematising by not explaining the issue of denomination but rather nuancing it.

The issue of the relationship between the Christian religion and anthroposophy was also taken up in detail by Elżbieta and Iwona Łoźna, who, moved by the sudden popularity of lectures by German and Dutch Waldorf educators in Poland, wrote a series of articles for *Posłaniec Warmiński* (a magazine published by the *Metropolitan Curia of the Archdiocese of Warmia* in Olsztyn), which made up the book *Waldorf School* published in 1996. Łoźnas first proposed an ecumenical approach to anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy, referring to the Second Vatican Council, but as the authors emphasise, it does not abolish “the decision of the church – the Congregation of the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) of 18th July, 1919, which was approved by Pope Benedict XV – Catholics were forbidden to belong to anthroposophical societies” (Łoźna & Łoźna, 1996, p. 36). In the chapter titled *The Dilemma*, they write:

A certain compromise solution could seem appropriate: while remaining a Christian, adopt the didactic and educational system that Waldorf pedagogy proposes without considering its anthroposophical roots at all. Such an attitude could be taken by both the teacher who wanted to work on the basis of this pedagogical system and the parents who wanted to send their child to the Steiner school. Both could simply ignore the source of this educational system. However, is it possible to use Waldorf pedagogy in such a way as to remain somewhat neutral towards its anthroposophical source?

(Łoźna & Łoźna, 1996, pp. 40–41)

The final question is rhetorical. The authors advise to carefully look at the methodology of Waldorf teaching and verify it in the light of Christianity – this applies especially to fairy tales told to the youngest, which – as they say – introduce them to the sphere of the occult. The final tone of the book by the Łoźna sisters is summarised in the words of the message of Bishop Jacek Jezierski from June 1994, which was read during Sunday masses in churches in Warmia, in connection with the establishment of a Waldorf school in Olsztyn. The bishop denounces the schools in short: “The thought of Rudolf Steiner is contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church. Hence, the Holy See warned Catholics against getting involved with them. This warning has lost nothing of its importance” (Łoźna & Łoźna, 1996, p. 43).

### *Once Against, Always Against*

Relations between the Waldorf community and the Church and the Catholic religion were difficult and ambiguous. In the stories of my interlocutors, the parent-founders of Polish Waldorf schools of the 1990s, establishing a school is not only an act of opposition to the school system of the People’s Republic of Poland. In their narratives the school also stands in opposition to the

Catholic Church, which is commonly perceived as an icon of political opposition in the 1980s and the fight for political freedom in Poland. Why did the Church replace the communist system as a negative point of reference?

Polish sociologist Hanna Świda-Ziemba, examining the image of the world and being in the world of young people at the end of the millennium, considers the relationship between the attitudes of “irrationalism” and “rationalism.” The first of them is characterised as an attitude poorly focused on achieving mental peace [seeking] and also negatively assessing the Catholic Church. The researcher therefore distinguishes “clusters of attitudes” characteristic of “irrationalists: unpredictability, magic, chaos, intense emotional life, and programmatic nonconformity towards what is institutional and environmentally sacred (mainly towards the institution of the Church) (Świda-Ziemba, 2000, p. 465). Świda-Ziemba’s “irrationalists” are not attracted to the Church by the irrationality of faith or the recognition of the secrets of the unknown that goes with it. In this context, the Church is perceived mainly as a well-organised institution with a clear ethical and ideological message, rooted in civilization for centuries, i.e. an institution that is “objectified” and symbolises the “social order” (Świda-Ziemba, 2000, p. 466). This is why after the democratic breakthrough, the Church as an institution upholding traditional values becomes – just like the communist system before the breakthrough – a synonym of an enemy trying to thwart the efforts of creating alternative lifestyles and Luckmann’s approach to religion.

Despite the initial melting into social-educational initiatives, after the democratic breakthrough, the Waldorf school remained on the margins of the educational social movement that was identifying oneself with “Solidarity.” Moreover, it opposed the Catholic Church that maintained its strong position based on the concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland, signed in Warsaw on 28 July 1993. In the new social reality, it still remained in the counterculture. As researcher of Polish culture Mirosław Pęczak writes, systemic change does not mean that:

in the field of culture, an automatic turn takes place, eliminating all remnants of the ‘old’ consciousness. [. . .] Counterculturalists could be tolerated by a large part of society only when their rebellion was intertwined with resistance to unwanted power, which, however, did not remove negative associations with ‘otherness’, ‘strangeness’ or even deviation. The same part of society, in the already changed political conditions, has no reason to continue to tolerate the counterculture, the more so that in the face of change they becomes a negative frame of reference for the counterculture.

(Pęczak, 1992, p. 104)

Counterculture is still, even after the breakthrough, identified with deviant behaviour – hence the frequent accusations of sectarianism, promoting a foreign culture, or perceptions of non-progressive education as conservative,

rejecting the “achievements” of capitalism. The Waldorf school did not become – as it was in the case of STO – a common educational alternative. Due to its anthroposophical roots and class distinctiveness, it functioned as an educational “other” and bore the yoke of the sect, whose image did not match the image of other schools in the movement, perceived as fighters with the school system for educational freedom.

### *Collective or Private? Challenges of the Present Times*

Due to the intensive development of Waldorf schools, kindergartens, and foundations in the East of Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, the IAO (*Internationale Assoziation für Waldorfpädagogik in Mittel- und Osteuropa und weiter östlichen Ländern* [International Association for Waldorf Pedagogy in Central and Eastern Europe and other Eastern Countries] was founded in Stuttgart in 1993. Its task is to:

promote Waldorf initiatives (schools, kindergartens) in Eastern Europe and other Eastern countries by organizing/supporting educational events/school assistance, translating/publishing books on Waldorf pedagogy, promoting international exchange for educational purposes, school partnerships, internships, scholarships supervision over the right to the name Waldorf Pedagogy and Rudolf Steiner Pedagogy, etc.

(IAO, n.d.)

The aim of the IAO is to cooperate with all school initiatives and institutions and to support teacher training in Eastern Europe. In addition to the IAO, Polish Waldorf facilities also report to other organisations. One of the most important is the so-called *Hague Circle* founded in 1970 in the *Vrije School Den Haag* and organising the annual international conference of the Waldorf movement, protecting the pedagogical concept of Rudolf Steiner, as well as issuing the annual world list of schools with the right to bear the name “Waldorf.” At the international level, there is also the organisation *Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners* [Friends of Rudolf Steiner’s Art of Education], run since 1971 and based in Berlin/Karlsruhe and Stuttgart, which supports Waldorf initiatives around the world through donations, volunteering, educational grants, and fundraising campaigns, and also collects stories of the establishment of schools in Europe. Another important body is the *Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum*, which is responsible for pedagogical education at the *Free School of Spiritual Knowledge* and the relationship between education and anthroposophy.

In 1995, a Polish organisation was established to gather dispersed associations establishing schools, and it functions till now as the *Association of Waldorf Schools and Kindergartens in Poland* (ZSIPW). There is a teacher training programme at *Warsaw University* called *Postgraduate Study of Independent Pedagogy* and an emerging one in Cracow, and there are six Waldorf

schools, nine Waldorf kindergartens, and 11 kindergartens inspired by Waldorf pedagogy (Związek Szkół i Przedszkoli Waldorfskich [n.d.]). Currently in Poland, the name “Waldorf” is given by the ZSIPW Association. This procedure involves the members of the union checking whether the school meets the requirements of Polish law and whether the work of the school is consistent with Waldorf pedagogy and anthroposophy. Thereafter organisational and methodological issues are checked. The determinants here are the morning main lesson (rhythmic part: musical and movement elements, the narrative part, epochal teaching, teaching without textbooks, the curriculum shaped by the teacher, descriptive assessment) and subject lessons after the main lesson (music, eurythmy, two foreign languages, manual, painting, drawing forms, physical activities). It is important to include annual holidays in the work schedule. The union and the school appoint mentors to look after the school, and the school adds to its charter that it is oriented towards a Waldorf pedagogy based on anthroposophy and that work in a regularly meeting teachers’ college and close cooperation with parents – meetings, lectures, taking care of their participation in holidays – take place. The school bodies are the teachers’ college, the board and the parents’ council, and the school implements the principle of collegiality, joint decision-making, delegation of tasks, as well as cooperation between teachers and parents. Financial and staff stability is also important. The ZSIPW records contain information that the preferred form of school organisation is a non-profit organisation and that “each teacher is fully responsible for the school” (Procedura nadania nazwy szkoła waldorfska [n.d.]).

Although the procedure was written down on several pieces of paper, its fulfilment still seems to be the main problem of schools in Poland, which, as my research shows, are organised on the basis of variations on these provisions. The main areas of conflict turn out to be the organisational form and collegial decision-making, teacher training, and the attitude towards anthroposophy. The school is commonly called “Waldorf,” which functions as a colloquial abbreviation but also implies the frequent direction of the Waldorf drift – on the one hand, from anthroposophy to secular school organisation, on the other hand, departing from Steiner’s social concepts, based on Social Threefolding, assuming the cooperation of parents, teachers, and the school board, to a school subjected to market mechanisms, based on a profit-oriented business model.

An example of a diverse approach to management can be two Krakow schools using the name “Waldorf.” Each of them has a different status and organisational formula. The *School of Janusz Korczak* is managed collectively by the teachers’ college. An important figure here, devoted to Waldorf pedagogy is Katarzyna Cieplińska, who also trains teachers at the *Postgraduate Study of Independent Pedagogy* and co-creates the *Association of Waldorf Kindergartens and Schools*. The school employs mainly young teachers associated with the anthroposophical vision of the world, who make sure that the assumptions of collegiality and joint decision-making are implemented.

The school is run by the *Wena Foundation*, which has a management board composed mainly of parents and a programme council composed of teachers, which is the college's representative in the foundation. The board is responsible for formal and economic matters, while the school is managed by the college, which decides on pedagogical issues, as well as the recruitment and dismissal of teachers, even against the will of the board. The decisions of the college are binding but made by consensus. Even when one person vetoes, the process starts all over again. The college appoints task forces that have full autonomy in making decisions in their areas – school appearance, library, staff recruitment, etc. Not every teacher immediately becomes a full member of the college. For the first two years, there is a probationary period during which the teacher has the right to speak – but not to vote. Only when newly hired teachers complete their studies and receive a contract of employment that they gain active voting rights.

The second school is organised on a different basis. It is a private school funded by Marek Sołek, an anthroposophist, eurhythmist, and former student of Krzysztof Jasiński of the independent *STU Theater*. Marek Sołek is an entrepreneur and a very efficient manager. He owns a stunt school where he educates on the basis of many years of his own professional practice. He managed to acquire a beautiful area on Zawila Street: two buildings (a primary school and a middle school/high school) and a huge garden and open space. He also organised a publishing house, where he republished works by pre-war anthroposophists as *The Educational Meaning of Art* by Karol Homolacs's, organises *Christengemeinschaft* [The Christian Community] services, invites foreign teachers, and established a new Waldorf teacher training college in consultation with the *Wincent Pol University of Social and Natural Sciences* in Lublin. As the school is new and the college is still taking shape, the role of the teachers' college in governance is debatable. Although several experienced Waldorf teachers are in the staff, for the time being the founder of the school is the central figure.

The two trends in the management of a school institution – collegial, represented by the School of Korczak, and the founding trend, exemplified by Marek Sołek's Waldorf school – have manifold consequences. For the first school, the process and relationships in the team are important, entangled in the difficult way of making decisions by many responsible managers. The type of managing the second school allows the quick establishment of many initiatives, and the decision-making process is short. Thanks to this, the effects are visible, and the school seems to be thriving, but it moves away from the idea of Social Threefolding, fundamental for Waldorf schools.

## **Conclusion**

The Polish reception of a Waldorf school was strongly dependent on political circumstances and conservative social moods. The condition for its appearance was always the achievement of a minimum of civil liberties by other

social movements. In the 1980s, the first signs of a revival of more favourable times for the return of the Waldorf school to Poland began to appear. This was related to democratic changes, increasing openness to the West, as well as the emerging fashion for New Age and psychotronics, resulting in an emergence of new media – newspapers that covered Waldorf topics.

In the vicinity of the democratic breakthrough, new social educational movements appeared, and many alternative schools were opened. The umbrella organisation STO at first absorbed it as one of its varieties; however, Waldorf wanted to underline their uniqueness, as an initiative of parents, representatives of the alternatively oriented middle class, looking for an alternative to McDonaldisation for their children. After 1989, the anthroposophical society in Poland was also reviving, but the school movement operated largely separately. The good fortune ended with the interest in the school of the Catholic Church and intellectuals associated with it, who saw anthroposophy as a sectarian threat. The topic was very popular in the 1990s due to the Church's attempts to establish itself at the centre of the state and to fight any signs of spiritual pluralism.

The present development of the movement is marked by the events from the 1990s and till now is not very dynamic. Considering recurring cultural patterns, the weaker the position of the institutions of social order such as the Church or the state, the conditions for Waldorf schools should be better. Today's Poland is marked by the mutually contradictory trends: retreat of the society from the Church, last 8 years of the rules of conservative government that influence the school system, and a great wave of social protests and educational movements that stand in solidarity with all educational minorities.

Although Waldorf schools with their reluctance to new media are sometimes considered anti-modern, I perceive their current presence in the media and academic discourses in Poland far less controversial than in the 1990s. I have not found any media scandals concerning Waldorf since then, but compared to the development of other alternative schools (e.g. Montessori), Waldorf movement grows slowly. The academic analysis of the Polish Waldorf movement was sparse since the 1990s, but on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Waldorf education, several books were published in Polish: a book on the history of the Waldorf movement by Waldorf teacher Maria Świerczek-Musiał (2022), a publication from a pedagogical perspective by Magdalena Ostolska (2021), and an anthropological book entitled *School of Transformation: About Waldorf School in the times of democratic breakthrough*, written by the author of this article. I hope it might be a beginning of new, interdisciplinary discussion on the presence of this school in Polish culture.

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# 5 Adopting and Adapting Waldorf Education

## Returning to the Roots Through Waldorf Education in Kenya

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### Brief History of Education in Kenya

Not much is known about educational systems of precolonial African societies, often referred to as *Traditional African Societies* (TAS). Traditional education in these societies was a holistic and continuous process integrated into every aspect of life. Its goal was to develop individuals who were respectful, integrated, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of their families and communities. Through traditional pedagogy, children learned essential beliefs, morals, skills, and aspirations, becoming productive members of society (Omolewa, 2007; Higgs, 2008). Similarly, in Kenya, information about the history and scope of education before independence is scarce. However, postcolonial records shed light on the educational landscape. *Traditional African Education* (TAE) in Kenya focused on socialisation and enculturation, ensuring the security and continuity of communal and social systems. This informal education system aimed to transmit accumulated wisdom and knowledge across generations, preparing young individuals for their future roles in society (Mosoti, 2011; Wamonje, 1976).

Kenya's educational system has been shaped by complex and dynamic relationships with its political economy, influenced by factors such as colonialism, postcolonialism, and globalisation (Matasci et al., 2020). Precolonial education in Kenya emphasised the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development. Local knowledge and practices were passed down through oral traditions, and skills were developed through apprenticeship within the community (Nikima, 2009). Moral education was integral, teaching values and beliefs through oral traditions and community participation. The precolonial education system in African societies promoted harmonious coexistence with the environment and emphasised communal living. It nurtured individuals as members of a collective, instilling a sense of responsibility for their actions and the well-being of the community. Education was a lifelong process, taking place within families and society, where older individuals acted as teachers. Practical learning and the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next were central aspects (Kenyatta, 1978).

The formal institutionalisation of education in Kenya can be traced back to the arrival of Europeans. Prior to independence, most schools were controlled by the colonial government and missionaries. The education system was racially divided, with separate systems for Europeans, Indians, and Africans. Industrial education, focused on agriculture and manual services, was emphasised for Africans living in rural areas (Mosoti, 2011; Wamonje, 1976). After independence, the Kenyan government aimed to eliminate poverty, disease, and ignorance through education. Skills development and the replacement of expatriates with indigenous talent were prioritised. Education was seen as the key to wealth creation, self-development, and environmental sustainability (Sessional Paper No. 10, 1965). Kenya adopted a single system of education, the 7-4-2-3 system, consisting of primary, secondary, high school, and university education (Mackatiani et al., 2016).

The colonial education system, which prioritised European values and individual academic development, had a significant impact on traditional education and the construction of moral personhood. It promoted rote memorisation and obedience to authority, stratifying individuals based on their educational qualifications. The modern education system in Kenya continues to be influenced by Western models, emphasising cognitive development and standardised testing. However, critics argue that it neglects the holistic development of individuals and the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Inyega et al., 2021).

Private education has played a significant role in Kenya's education history, with the *Church Missionary Society* establishing the first formal school in 1846. Private education, including individuals, non-governmental organisations, and for-profit groups, expanded with the commitment to *Universal Primary Education and Education for All* goals (Nafula et al., 2007). The expansion of private education can also be attributed to population growth, demands for higher-quality education, and the government's inability to meet parents' diverse needs (Colclough, 1997; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Tooley, 2019). Kenya has approximately 8,000 private schools, with some following the local curriculum (8-4-4 system) while others use the *General Certificate of Education* from the United Kingdom (Educational International, 2023).

### **Background on Waldorf in Kenya**

Waldorf education is based on Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy teachings and has expanded globally (Uceda, 2015). The first Waldorf school was established in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany, and since then, it has spread to various countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, Tanzania, Kenya, Australia, Brazil, and China (Stehlik, 2019). While the Waldorf tradition has a long history, its presence in Africa is relatively recent, with South Africa being one of the first countries to adopt it. Teacher training programs in Africa are overseen by the *South African Federation of Waldorf Schools* and

focus on Steiner's teachings, child development, philosophy, and lesson planning (Uceda, 2015). These programs consist of 12 modules conducted over three years, with each module lasting two weeks and attended by practising Waldorf teachers. Training also emphasises personal development, meditation, and commitment to Waldorf principles in the classroom. Until 2018, these trainings were led by South African trainers and rotated among Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. However, they are now based at one of the Kenyan schools and partially led by veteran Kenyan Waldorf teachers. According to the interviewees, 15–30 teachers attend each module. As part of their training, teachers are also expected to “develop a willingness to work on their own meditative life [ . . . ] and commit to observing the child in all aspects” and to be “accountable to their colleagues and to the public” in upholding and practicing Waldorf education in their classrooms.

Today, there are educational institutions – ranging from preschool to adult education and training concentrated mostly in South Africa but also spreading in East Africa, to Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Madagascar. It is difficult to assess how many Waldorf schools are in Kenya and East Africa today because different private and informal organisations operate them without one official body that everyone recognises. According to the *Wider Movement: Encounters & Expressions* website, for example, which is supposed to concentrate all the schools in Africa, only five schools, four preschools, and ten adult education and training facilities are identified. In practice, however, there are many more. Furthermore, many schools are inspired by Steiner's teachings, informal educational spaces that are based on his teachings, along with many schools that the government does not formally register. Finally, anthroposophy is a philosophy that has teachings and implications for aspects of human life, including medicine, agronomy, and art, and many centres operate as community centres that include education but do not identify as educational centres or a school. Nevertheless, there are fewer than a dozen official primary schools in Kenya, and a few sporadically spread-out schools and early child development centres in other East African countries. But with only 1% of kindergartens and less than 2% of Waldorf schools in the world, the African continent is by far the least represented in terms of the implementation of schools claiming the pedagogical heritage of Rudolf Steiner in the world.

Because of the nature of Steiner's philosophy, which provides a holistic picture of how society is meant to function, the boundaries between different aspects of life are not clear-cut. Meetings and intersections between different aspects are something that Waldorf organisations in Africa also support. For this purpose, the *All Africa Anthroposophical Training* (AAAT), initiated by the *Human Development and Social Competence Organisation*, is organised every year in a different country on the continent and includes the study of anthroposophical medicine, biodynamic farming, ethical business, child development, and Waldorf education. These were led by South African trainers and established Waldorf facilitators from Switzerland and Germany but,

in recent years, have been joined by teachers, NGO and agricultural cooperatives directors, as well as health workers from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. The purpose of this modular anthroposophic training is “to bring general teaching and development from Anthroposophy to participants from across Africa who have an interest in human development” (AAAT, n.d.). The first such training was initiated in 2018 in Kenya, followed by one in Zimbabwe in 2020, Tanzania in 2021, and Uganda in 2022.

Many African organisations connect the words of Rudolf Steiner with African thought, leadership, and traditions. Thus the main website, which encompasses all the Waldorf initiatives on the continent: *The Wider Movement: Encounters & Expressions* has quotes of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu on its home page<sup>1</sup> to give this movement validity. Different organisations have identified and emphasised these similarities between certain aspects of Ubuntu learning, a word that translates as “shared humanness,” symbolising a philosophy widespread in many parts of Africa (Bangura, 2005) and Rudolf Steiner’s teaching, particularly in South Africa. For example, the *Novalis Ubuntu Institute* in Cape Town in 1984, which provides holistic learning for disadvantaged communities, does this by combining “the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner and the universal spiritual values embraced in the African philosophy of Ubuntu” (Novalis Ubuntu Institute, n.d.).

### *Discussion of Methodological Approach*

Following a brief overview of education in Kenya and the development of Waldorf education in Kenya, we ask how Waldorf education is perceived by Kenyan teachers. How do they regard Waldorf education in relation to pre-colonial education and to modern state education shaped by colonial powers and educational ideals? And, finally, what is their critique of Waldorf education in the local context, and what potential benefits do they believe Kenyan children could reap from Waldorf education? This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Nairobi. Fieldwork was conducted over a total period of three months in 2018. Data collection began from a broader comparative research project focused on the transnationalism of education and on Nairobi’s established, prestigious international schools – research that fleshed out stark contrasts between the schools’ enclaves of privilege and their immediate urban surroundings (Rey et al., 2021; Kagan & Gez, 2021). During data collection for this project,<sup>2</sup> we saw that Waldorf schools follow a parallel but quite different educational course from other international schools (Bolay & Rey,

1 The Wider Movement (n.d.). The Wider Movement. Encounters & Expressions. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230802162822/www.thewidermovement.org.za/> (memento from 2 August 2023).

2 The project was funded by the *Swiss National Science Foundation*, project number 161231.

2021). Waldorf education is also rooted in international educational networks, the expansion of international curricula, and the enlargement of idealist and pedagogical projects. However, parents' choice to send their children to these schools, the children who attend them, and the ideals at the heart of these schools are very different.

Beyond the designated fieldwork, our findings draw on the authors' combined decades of research in urban Kenya, and one of the authors has experiences working in Waldorf educational frameworks as a teacher and a parent whose children attend these frameworks. In addition to ethnographic school visits, participation in the first AAA training, teacher training sessions, and informal observations, the core of our data collection included 22 semi-structured interviews with teachers and other staff members working in Waldorf schools in East Africa. These interviews focused on teachers' professional biographies and aspirations, their understandings of Waldorf pedagogical approaches, questions regarding internationalism, connections between Waldorf and local cultures, and their assessment of pupils' schooling trajectories. During the data collection period, we visited three Waldorf schools and conducted formal interviews with a total of 22 Waldorf teachers and facilitators, 17 Kenyan teachers and five from Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, and Tanzania. All interviews were between 30 and 80 minutes and recorded, transcribed, and analysed using content-analysis methods and software. As the interviewees were current employees of Waldorf schools, attempts were made to offset potential biases in their narratives, including the isolation of teaching staff from the presence of their superiors and a promise of anonymity. All the names are pseudonymised in the study. A review of Kenyan and international newspaper articles, reports, blog posts, and online interviews with Waldorf founders in sub-Saharan Africa supplemented these interviews.

### *Adopting Waldorf to Africa*

The Waldorf system of education is based on the three philosophical natures of human beings: thinking, feeling, and willing. In the developing child, the three philosophical natures represent the head, the heart, and the hands of the child. Waldorf education envisions improving human society by helping children realise their potential as intelligent and creative whole persons. This approach to education views children as active authors of their own development albeit strongly influenced by natural, active, innate self-righting forces that enhance their growth and learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To make children active authors of their lives, Waldorf teachers use carefully prepared aesthetically attractive environments that serve as pedagogical tools and provide strong messages about a curriculum that stresses respect for children. In this section, focus is on the structure, pedagogy, and criticisms levelled against Waldorf education.

*Structure of Waldorf*

The Waldorf curriculum is based on anthroposophy, adopting a holistic approach to learning that brings together subject areas such as art and music, literature, folktale, mythology, rhythmic musical movements, crafts, natural sciences, foreign languages and varied outdoor activities.

Learning is first done by imitation and imaginary play, while later children are encouraged to develop their ‘feeling intelligence’ and finally reaching the ability to develop independent judgement and the ability to seek truth in the world on their own.

(Finser & Torin, 1994, p. 43)

The role of the teacher in Waldorf education is significant in that they are guides and mentors. The teachers are required to create classroom environments where children bring their thinking, feeling, and will. The teachers are meant to encourage the child’s natural sense of wonder, belief in goodness, and love for beauty. Waldorf education hence focuses on creativity, imagination, and arts while placing strong emphasis on the development of moral values and personal responsibility. Dahlin (2017) observes that the Waldorf education philosophy is similar to John Dewey’s idea of “learning by doing,” also referred to as the “active and participatory” mode of learning. It developed in the context of a growing body of reform pedagogies that connected across Europe during the early 20th century (Riondet et al., 2018).

Teachers compare Waldorf education to Indigenous African education, which remains the cornerstone for contemporary education (Nyangaresi, 2022). They exhibit the focus on learning by doing with less emphasis given to intellectual development. Learning is meant to enhance the development of active listening skills, maintenance of interpersonal relationships, access to research materials, as well as the development of reasoning and judgement. Teachers in Waldorf education are trained in child development and philosophy and are given practical guidance in lesson planning consistent with the curriculum that includes practical work and crafts, eurythmy, art, and mythology. They are expected to nurture their own aesthetic abilities and creatively apply appropriate materials and teaching strategies in lessons for aesthetic classrooms and school environment. To be fully effective in teaching the Waldorf curriculum, such teachers would therefore have to be retrained. This was captured in one of the interviews with the teachers who had this to say:

[W]e put two new schools here in Kenya[. . .]. [H]opefully, we feel like now we have put a seed here. Soon we shall grow and our branches will go all over. Because now there’ll [sic] be looking for teachers who can teach children activities, you know, because teachers were used to go in, you teach the material and you are done. But now the teachers are asking themselves, what activities do we do with these children? We are not trained like that.

(Claudette)



This was also reinforced by another teacher who indicated that:

[W]hen they heard about Waldorf education, they went to Waldorf schools and then they went back to Tanzania and thought we want to have an African version of this, you know Europeans are too organized and different so they came to South Africa and that's where I met them and had much to learn and training. We got to Tanzania, and we thought it was over and for a year nothing happened, and then the people who were running the school here because they're all East Africa they all talk to each other, and we didn't have training down there, and I said let's bring the training here and restart it, it was in 1999, and we've been there ever since.

(Jack)

Retraining teachers therefore helped update the teachers' skills to match the requirements of Waldorf schools. With retraining, the teachers are more likely to have increased efficiency and therefore become more adaptable, thus increasing their job satisfaction and morale.

### *Local Culture and Waldorf*

Mosoti observes that Ubuntu, a concept and philosophy that underpins many African societies, including Kenya, is based on the belief that a human being is a human being through the otherness of other human beings: "I am because others are and because others are I am" (Mosoti, 2011). Although every individual is born human, the formation of humanness that espouses the philosophy of Ubuntu is achieved through the process of socialisation. Within a community, one is therefore nurtured into becoming mature and responsible by embracing the values, norms, and community principles. This nurturing is replicated in almost all African cultures. Ubuntu and Waldorf education are both philosophical concepts that offer a unique perspective on human relationships and personal growth. As philosophical concepts, they are complementary in the sense that they both emphasise relationships as in Ubuntu; relationships with others are seen as essential for persons to truly become themselves, while in Waldorf education, the relationship between the teacher and the student is seen as central to the learning process (Dahlin, 2017). They both adopt the holistic approach to learning: Ubuntu considers the well-being of the person as a reflection of the community as a whole, and Waldorf education equally considers the development of the whole person in the context of the community. Finally, both place strong emphasis on creative expression and the importance of imagination in personal growth and development (Dolamo, 2013).

The local Kenyan culture, like other African cultures with a strong base in Ubuntu, is rich in education and training and is founded on oral rather than written tradition. For a long time, oral tradition was taught in such a way that children were encouraged to use language creatively and effectively



(Mosoti, 2011). Dolamo (2013) observes that proverbs, riddles, and sayings have been the modes of communication in learning within the local cultures. Such communication provided succinct, easily remembered outlines of important ideas and experiences that were part of shared cultural community knowledge.

Through proverbs, riddles, sayings, and songs, children would be taught about justice, right governance, good neighbourliness, collective action, freedom, sharing, servitude, and civility. In all these, the main concern was moulding the child's character. Moral qualities such as sociability, integrity, honesty, courage, solidarity, endurance, ethics, and honour were demanded, observed, and endorsed (Moumouni, 1968).

From the interviews with the teachers, Waldorf education seems to share similar principles of learning with the indigenous local cultures. This is what the interviewees had to say:

I believe that the kind of indication that we had, back in the days knew when our parents were still going to school in very much like Waldorf education, very, very much. Things only changed much later. [. . .] And so I believe that the country needs people who have been taught, like, as a country, but if you look at, say, our traditional cultures, you know, we try and teach in that way, when we use stories and arts.

(Naomi)

This can also be illustrated through storytelling:

A long time ago, children would help out with activities at home. And then a time would come when they would all sit around, and maybe the grandmother, or the grandfather, and then he would tell stories to the children, stories about their culture, you know, he would educate the children on their cultural stories, and they would know them and they [stories] would not die with them.

(Mumbi)

Waldorf schools are known to promote life-long learning, and parents and children who have gone through the system end up forming a community of like-minded people with the same habits and routines. Both parents and children learn through the children's experiences including what they observe. The end result is expected to be children who are more confident, self-motivated, and able to think critically (Stehlik, 2019).

### *Pedagogy of Waldorf Education*

As an alternative educational approach, the Waldorf system of learning has a pedagogy that is more focused on arts and aesthetics than on intellectual development, and children are exposed to numerous games that involve gross

motor movement as well as manual and artistic work like painting, modelling with clay, making toys, singing with rhythmical movements, reciting poetry, and organisation. In the first cycle, Waldorf educators believe that children's life forces are focused on physical development and therefore learn through play and imitation (de Souza, 2012). In the second cycle, teachers focus on developing feelings and imagination to scaffold the emotional development important for future social relationships. Storytelling is seen as an important strategy in emotional development. Through stories, children are helped to create images that will naturally be memorable to them. In both the first and second cycles, eurythmy, physical education, handwork, and woodwork are encouraged. Eurythmy is meant to connect body and soul and a powerful means of expressing oneself artistically. This has been illustrated through the interviews with participants:

I teach lucrative stories. Yeah, but in terms of like pedagogy, like arts it is not all about the curriculum that is in Kenya now even to the Waldorf now because they're trying and it is their effort to make sure that this Waldorf is reaching everybody so if they continue to practice like the Kenyan culture it will hinder them to reach other people to know about Waldorf and they have to do what Steiner said so they have to implement – exactly what Steiner said – local we want to grow and become a big Waldorf school.

(Lewis)

Role-play can also be used in this cycle as illustrated through acting out Biblical stories:

There's a time we did Mary and Joseph, during Christmas, there was a time we did the Noah's Ark, and I was Noah's wife and then during Mary and Joseph I was Mary. And then [chuckles] and there was always so much fun. Then we did [. . .] which other play did we do? that was so important. We did also an Egyptian thing, we did an Egyptian play which was [. . .] I don't remember what I was, but we did some Egyptian play. And I think I was the wife of Cyrus or something.

(Beatrice)

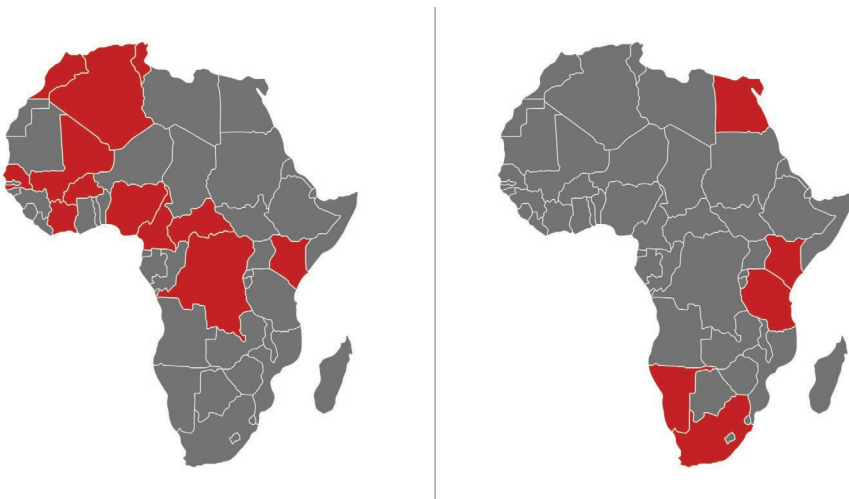
In the third cycle, teachers' focus is on the development of independent intellectual abilities alongside the ability to examine the abstract world with discernment, judgement, and critical thinking, providing children with some autonomy over their education. It is assumed that by the time students are in this stage, their hearts and bodies are connected, and they can be trained in a more logical and structured fashion. With the help of mentorship, learners are expected to reach their full potential and hone their specialised talents and skills.

*Critique towards State Schools: Waldorf Education as an Expression of Precolonial Nostalgia*

According to the *Directory of Steiner-Waldorf Schools, Kindergartens and Teacher Education Centers Worldwide 2022*, Kenya has three Waldorf schools and five kindergartens, the latter being members of the *International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education* (IAWECE). It is one of only four countries in sub-Saharan Africa whose Waldorf schools are mentioned in this list, with 23 schools and 22 kindergartens on the continent. Only South Africa has more schools in sub-Saharan Africa (14 kindergartens and 16 Waldorf schools), which can probably be explained by the large German immigration in the late 19th century (Viaud, 2017). Interestingly, the other countries with Waldorf schools, Kenya – Namibia, and Tanzania – were once German colonies or protectorates.

This fact underscores the relevance of the colonial historical context, which is also relevant to the expansion of other alternative pedagogies in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, by contrasting the case of two prominent French and German pedagogical reformers of the early 20th century, namely the Frenchman Célestin Freinet and the German Rudolf Steiner, Viaud (2017) observes that the subsequent spread and current implementation of schools that claim to follow this pedagogical trend across sub-Saharan Africa still follow the geography of former colonial empires, with some rare exceptions.

This historical context may seem paradoxical since, for the teachers we interviewed, Waldorf pedagogy is often presented in opposition to the drifts of teaching according to the state educational model, the 8–4–4 curriculum of the Kenyan state education. This curriculum is in turn sometimes perceived



*Figure 5.1* Left: Countries with at least one Freinet school. Right: Countries with at least one Waldorf school. (Own illustration after Viaud, 2017, p. 14.)

as a form of extension of an educational system whose foundations were established during the colonial period, as we will discuss later. This raises the question of how a pedagogy of European origin, whose historical implantation in sub-Saharan Africa follows spaces affected by colonisation, can serve as a lever to challenge a mainstream educational model implemented by the Kenyan government.

One of the criticisms of the public school expressed by teachers is the emphasis on cognitive learning at an early age to the detriment of the child's overall development. In contrast, Waldorf education does not emphasise cognitive learning until about age seven. It rather emphasises a holistic approach that includes the child's body and feelings, movement, and experimentation.

At the age of the kindergarten kid, it is a place where we are totally supposed to develop first physically. [. . .] So state schools do it the other way. [. . .] Because I'm thinking they focus in their mind, on the mind first when we're supposed to focus on their body first then they develop. And so the mind was not ready for all these.

(Grace)

I would say, it's totally different from outside there. Because, I would say out there. We taught, but we're teaching the head. We did not mind about their feelings, we do not mind about the doing. It is just the head, head, head, head. And we were teaching facts, just facts, straight away to the fact and that's it.

(Francesca)

More generally, the criticism of the public school extends to the inhumane way in which children are treated, which, according to our interviewee – a teacher in a Waldorf school and a mother – is the result of a profound misunderstanding of child development. This criticism is also indirectly related to the educational methods often favoured in the family sphere, and our interlocutor confided to us that she had been inspired by the Waldorf pedagogical approach to consider the education of her own children in a non-violent manner.

Because there is a lot of mistreatment in state schools and yeah, no feelings, there are no human feelings, you don't feel that the child is a child [. . .]. When I came here. I didn't – I didn't believe [. . .]. No, I didn't believe that. Okay, anything can happen with anything, anything can come out of the children without beating. But I, I really tell people, it's very possible and let the cane be that the last thing I would ever think about. So it's really helped me as a person. And also the Waldorf curriculum really helped me to bring up my children, because I didn't do it to them when they were growing [. . .] and this is the time I see, wow, it was really good and it can really work.

(Grace)

While public education emphasises learning with the primary goal of passing tests in a highly competitive environment, thus earning a top spot in a school environment driven by meritocratic ideals that struggle to live up to their promise, Waldorf education helps children reflect on and build a meaningful life experience that can serve them throughout their lives. The criticism of a system that puts children under pressure without succeeding in giving meaning to their learning comes up repeatedly in the comments of the teachers interviewed.

What we are doing to children in normal education is not what it should be. They get lost. They don't have the . . . the taste of education. They don't have it. Because it's like they are pressurized. they're forced to do this. They have to do this. And sometimes they don't have any reason why they are doing it. It's not making sense to them. [. . .] [Whereas Waldorf education] helps the children to think, yeah, it helps the children to see much more deeper than what it is. It's not just an education of just passing exams. But it's more like that. Yeah. It gives them life experience.

(Nafula)

The role of [. . .] or maybe for us teachers is to develop individuals who are able, out of their own initiative, to impart purpose and direction to their lives. [. . .] [T]he real meaning of education. It's not just to give that knowledge to that child so the child can vomit into you [. . .] but it has to have meaning. When you eat bread, the bread is to [. . .] to work in your body. It's not [. . .] we don't give you bread to vomit it, but it is for you to work in your body. I mean for the education to have meaning in your life. [. . .] [Most teachers think] [y]ou have to get there with a cane. And you know when you get there with a cane you are supposed to inflict fear.

(Bertrand)

In contrast, the pedagogical approach of Waldorf schools insists on the need to cultivate the child's aspirations and not to force him or her to do things that he or she does not want to do. Thus the role of the teacher is to accompany the child in his or her learning process at a pace and in ways that are unique to the child.

The child is the one who helps, yes, the teacher to know what to teach. So with Waldorf, the child is nurtured in many things. The child is not forced to do what it does not want. It is his will, to have a passion for what he/she wants. We don't demand a lot from the child. That's why there's no test to gauge them, we only help the child to understand what is good.

(Rose)

Waldorf teachers also insisted on the difference from mainstream education when it comes to the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the child. One reported from their own experience how he/she was not cared about at school in his/her own childhood, in order to contrast with his/her experience as a teacher as we see in the following quote:

Myself, I went to the normal school. And I could see like, when you come to school, nobody cares about you. So it's you, who comes by the school and you have to do your . . . your classroom work and everything. As long as you haven't done well, or you have done well, nobody's caring about you. Yeah, you just come by the school, do everything and you go home. When you come to the Waldorf, as a teacher, you have to receive a child by reverence, by love, which is very different from . . . from the normal school. And also, I could feel like as long as I'll receive a child, by love, the children [. . .] don't even want to leave the school.

(Fabrice)

Cultivating developmental qualities in children involves following their own pace, their own development, as well as letting them ask their own questions. Yet the act of questioning also represents an important reconfiguration of the teacher–student relationship, particularly with respect to the expression of authority. The educational intention of forming autonomous individuals capable of questioning their teachers or parents thus represents a challenge to the social acceptance of this type of education, as the act of questioning elders may be perceived as a challenge to their statutory position. This reveals the fact that education is not only about education but also about the way in which social relations as a whole are represented:

Okay, because of the foundation, they have been given here, one thing, they don't have fear in themselves. The second thing, they know how to express themselves. under any circumstance, so what we do, the third thing is that they can challenge you even whether you're the mother or the mother about the questions that you are talking about. They won't care whether you are a mother, but if you're doing something which is wrong, and they are not pleased, excuse me they will just be on your face, and actually they tell you, mum can . . . I would like to talk to you.

(Juliette)

Another point of criticism of the Kenyan school system is its subordination to the economy and the productivity imperative, which is directly linked to the pressure to perform. In some cases, teachers have expressed their disagreement with the public school system, which, in their view, treats children

as “machines” or “robots” who can only work from early in the morning to late at night without any breathing time.

Because we are capitalists . . . [in] Kenya and we see the number one as the best person. And that’s what we have been doing; even me, I work very well to get first class degree, if you get 3rd class degree you are not good. So Kenya they have trained people children to work harder . . . so what they do they don’t have tools in them to use but they cram for exams and when they go to real life, practical life, they fail [. . .]. [W] used to help them to be robots.

(Lewis)

In a similar vein, a former Waldorf elementary school student, Claudette, who attended another secondary school – as there is no Waldorf secondary school in Kenya yet – described the contrast in her experiences in these terms:

After I left here, like I went not to a mainstream school, but it just does something similar to this system. It was a private school. [. . .] [I]t was more like a corporate kind of school. So all you were expected to do is perform, perform, perform, perform! So it was sort of, we weren’t doing mainstream learning, but it was more focused on, you have to, because we would set targets like you set your own goals during, like, in the morning, then you know, today I’m going to do math, this amount of math, this amount of English. And if you don’t achieve what you said, now that becomes a problem. So you have to push it to tomorrow’s goals. So if you do that for the entire week, then you won’t achieve the week’s goals because you keep on pushing. So you had to make sure that every day you achieve what you’ve set to do. And you’re human. It won’t happen all the time. But you’re expected to do that all the time. [. . .] There’s no time to breathe. [. . .] I mean, it’s, it was . . . it was . . . it was . . . it was, it was good, it had its good side and it’s bad side, but more negative than positive, but here [at Waldorf] I experienced more positive than negative. [. . .] One thing, I always feel like, our system needs to learn more about the child. It’s not a dumping place. It’s not a place where you can just squeeze knowledge into a child, they need to know that this child needs also breathing space. [. . .] The child is not a machine. The child is a human being. [. . .] I have come to realize that the most important thing is to bring up human beings who are responsible human beings, human beings who understands [sic] the world.

(Claudette)

Several teachers expressed their views on the educational reforms underway at the time of the survey, which aimed to replace the 8–4–4 education system with a competency-based curriculum. Interviewees viewed this change

rather positively, since it would allow a paradigm shift from “passing the test” to the development of competence, even though the implementation of this reform was still pending. Some even considered that the new education curriculum would be closer to the Waldorf education, integrating creativity as one central element of the curriculum. They also saw the reform as a response to the expression of Kenyan parents’ weariness with the limitations of the 8–4–4 system. This would also indicate a change in parents’ attitudes towards educational issues, in which they feel more concerned than in the past.

Finally the Government of Kenya is coming to shape the education curriculum to appear more or less like the Waldorf. I don’t know whether you have heard about it, but the Kenyan curriculum is going through innovation. And they are innovating towards us. They’re bringing creativity and career shaping from a lower age. And they’re bringing mostly creativity which is an element, a big element in Waldorf education.

(Lewis)

For some teachers, the critique of public education is also part of a postcolonial critique and expresses a desire to break with an education system that is widely perceived as a legacy of the colonial era. One of the founders of a Waldorf school in Kenya explained that the education system inherited by Kenyans was designed to prepare collaborators for subaltern positions in the colonial administration. According to him, independence did not fundamentally transform this perspective but rather extended this approach throughout the education system.

The British colonizers, when they brought their education, it also had an English perspective. And you find that the Africans were not taught to [. . .] work in many big companies. They are just to be service providers: make sure that you know arithmetic, you’re able to speak in English [. . .]. So, the basic numeracy and literacy. But when Moi, the second president of Kenya came, he did establish so many commissions. [. . .] But these Commissions kept on saying that education should be approached this way. [. . .] And [he] just went ahead and said we are going to do this. And he adopted the 8–4–4 system of education.

(Lawrence)

The perception of a lost society, somewhat idealised, which would represent the true Kenyan society, faithful to tradition, seems to feed a feeling of nostalgia for a precolonial past that should be revived.

Yeah because what I was telling you about is already broken [. . .]. [W]hat we were talking about our tradition it is no longer there and my neighbour does not bother about me, my neighbour who is supposed



to be my uncle doesn't bother about me[. E]ven if he bothers my father will be serious [and] take him to court but again that my uncle if he finds me doing something wrong he will punish me [. . .]

(Fabrice)

The loss of the social bond and the loss of meaning, fed by an ultra-competitive and purposeless educational system, gives way to the possibility of educational alternatives that allow the personal and collective healing of educational damage. This would help restore the self-confidence of children who have suffered greatly from an inadequate educational system.

Healing, so, personal, community level, and then also healing with the land. And so, a lot of what we see, when we work, we do a lot of programs for younger people, for young people not children. And [. . .] the first part of our work is helping them rebuild their sense of who they are and their confidence in themselves. Because the education system has taken it completely, stripped it out of them. Especially the, you know, the poorest schools in Zimbabwe.

(Juliette)

### *Criticisms of Waldorf Education*

Despite the observed growth and success of Steiner's education, Waldorf schooling has received a number of criticisms over the years. First, it has been argued that the Waldorf educational approach is unscientific, often discouraging educational researchers from getting involved in the study of Waldorf schools. Ullrich (1994a) argues that this is because the approach cannot be placed in any established academic field or discipline, including philosophy, sociology, or psychology. As a result, no basic, systematic academic work accounts for the theoretical grounds of Waldorf education in an open, unprejudiced, and impartial way relating to other streams of educational thought and practice. Second, Al Shehab (2022) posits that Steiner advocates for the use of eurythmy, the possibility of connecting body, soul, and mind into a harmonious unity triangle, but others criticise eurythmy as a ritual act, a quasi-religious practice that has no positive health benefit and that may instead affect the psycho-emotional sphere of one's personality. Third, Stehlik (2019) observes that the Waldorf educational system excessively influences children with esoteric dogma. Similar issues have also troubled some of the local Kenyan teachers who shared their unease because of the merging of the spiritual and the educational, the personal and the professional. For example, Jack says:

The [Waldorf] committee said, 'I think people don't understand well about these 12 senses.' So they had a special workshop for three days for 12 senses. But I noticed that some other teachers don't take it seriously

[. . .]. And even though Waldorf doesn't force anybody they really explained that it is up to you [. . .]. The spiritual side distances – Some people accept it but not fully. Some . . . they start and grow gradually and then they say yes, but some of them say, 'I will work in this way.' So also this helps make people sometimes not take it seriously. I didn't have this questioning because I was fresh from college – others have a lot of experience with other philosophies from the other side of education and questioned it more.

As we can see from Jack's perspective, the spiritual aspects of Waldorf and the expectation for teachers to work on their self-development – meaning their spiritual self and learning of anthroposophy – made many teachers uncomfortable. Furthermore, the reputation of Waldorf in Kenya also makes many of the teachers and parents in Kenya wary and makes the ideas seem foreign, especially because of its unconventional ceremonies that are often misinterpreted as devil worship. For example, Michael shares:

The ideas seem very strange for many Kenyans. Very strange indeed. At the extremes of it . . . whenever you just google about Rudolf Steiner anthroposophy what comes out on the internet, it is not much about education, but . . . ahm . . . but other stuff about sexuality, cultism, and occult science and all that. But the extreme did happen when we had some, something like devil worship in [Kenyan] schools sometimes back and the Education Department in Kenya had to research in different schools and our school was one of them. And they came and they took photos when the director was doing children service, and they thought it was a bit strange . . . and then it was in the newspaper . . . Devil worshipping in Schools . . . But you also get to understand Kenya's a very Christian country. So they come and tell me to leave the culture, what you're doing is not right. Because those are demons you are worshipping. So this is the true God, and that God . . . it was very much because of that narrow understanding to Christianity, and maybe spiritual things. And to what was happening about devil worshipping . . . Ah . . . and things of the sort. So it kind of tainted the school.

Although one of the main characteristics of Waldorf education is that the curriculum is supposed to be delivered in the cultural, geographical, and political contexts of the school, the spiritual and ceremonial aspects, which are at the basis of Waldorf education, can often create suspicion and cause alarm for both teachers and parents in the local context. Furthermore, sometimes the local regulations, requirements, and legislations may conflict with Waldorf principles; for example, the age at which children begin school, the use of standardised tests, secularism, and the emphasis on numeracy and literacy (Stehlik, 2019). The fact that children are not introduced to regular schoolwork that involves reading and writing until they

are 7 years old is a cause of concern to many parents. Parents feel that such intentional delay in intellectual development and failure to expose children to the world of technology may disadvantage them in the modern world of technology and Information Communication Technology (ICT). Besides, the concept of looping (the same caregiver teaching the class for more than two consecutive years), which is central in Waldorf education, cannot be practiced today, where teachers live in a fast-paced and career-shifting modern world. This gap between Waldorf philosophy and the reality in which children live in the 21st century causes many Kenyan upper-class parents to feel concerned about the ability of Waldorf education to prepare their children for their futures.

### **Is Waldorf a (Re)Invention and (Re)Negotiation of Precolonial Education Systems?**

We have already raised this question: how does a pedagogy of European origin, whose historical implantation in sub-Saharan Africa, follow spaces affected by colonisation and empower teachers to challenge a mainstream educational model implemented by the Kenyan government and its colonial legacy? Overall, the practical pedagogy of Rudolf Steiner kindergartens and schools resembles the initiatives of the new education movement that are contemporary to it (Riondet et al., 2018). What distinguishes Waldorf pedagogy from other institutions of this movement is the emphasis it places on systematisation and spatial, temporal, and conceptual ritualisation of educational and pedagogical practice. In contrast to the largely demythologised world of public education, Waldorf pedagogy emphasises the cultural dimension that is at once aesthetic, moral, and ritualistic. This orientation of Steiner's pedagogy flows directly from the anti-modernist world-view that characterises anthroposophy (Ullrich, 1994b). In this sense, Waldorf pedagogy allows teachers to connect to a global (but Western-rooted) critique of the modernist world-view that has fuelled both imperial endeavours and the development of modern educational systems.

The Waldorf educational system is based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, who believed that the purpose of education was to develop the whole person, including the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. The Waldorf system emphasises the importance of creativity, imagination, and the arts in education, and it places a strong emphasis on the development of moral values and personal responsibility (Stehlik, 2019; Petrash, 2002). The precolonial education system, just like Waldorf, had a strong emphasis in holistic learning and development of moral values and personal responsibility. Both education systems also emphasise the importance of individuals making their own choices and taking responsibility for their actions. This enhances creativity and independent thinking, which promotes autonomy. In addition, pedagogically, both put more premium on

storytelling and other forms of oral communication, which are closely connected to the culture and traditions of the people.

Colonial education system has also informed the adoption of the Waldorf system in Kenya. Colonial education systems were designed to suppress the culture and knowledge of colonised peoples, and the standard mainstream educational system has recently gained more and more criticism from Kenyan parents. They argue that the system is limited because it focuses exclusively on cognitive development and standardised testing, which is not conducive to the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally, this system does not develop a whole person emotionally, physically, and spiritually and does not recognise the importance of self-expression and autonomy, which is seen as critical for contemporary problem-solving. Having recognised the limitations of the mainstream education system, parents have sought out alternative education systems that prioritise the holistic development of the whole person (Akala, 2021). The Waldorf system, with its emphasis on creativity, imagination, and autonomy, has been seen as a viable alternative to the traditional Western-style education system. Although Waldorf education also has colonial origins and is also brought in by European “agents,” Kenyan parents and teachers emphasise the similarities between Waldorf education and “traditional” education and values (such as Ubuntu). Like precolonial education systems in Kenya, they argue that Waldorf embraces holistic education, which promotes autonomy and self-expression through the emphasis on creativity and the arts and is based on the oral tradition, where knowledge and skills were passed down from generation to generation through storytelling and other forms of spoken communication. Furthermore, the Waldorf system has been positioned as an alternative education system that promotes the preservation of culture and knowledge of the Kenyan people, helping recreate and preserve local cultural heritages and traditions through holistic education that relies on storytelling, crafts, and rhythm.

At the same time, many Kenyan teachers are suspicious of anthropology because of its spiritual basis, which is viewed as anti-Christian, and this has hurt the reputation of Waldorf schools in the local context. Furthermore, the delay in learning literacy and numeracy till the age of seven and the absence of examinations and learning through the arts and storytelling are difficult for many Kenyan parents to accept as they are worried that Waldorf does not prepare their children for the future. On the one hand, other parents understand that creativity and critical thinking are necessary to thrive in the 21st century and appreciate the skills that Waldorf education can provide to their children. On the other hand, the neoliberal context and striving for excellence – especially prominent among the upper-middle class of Kenyan parents who send their children to Waldorf – make it difficult for them to fully embrace this educational and spiritual world-view.

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# 6 Debating a Pedagogy Without Talking About Pedagogy

## Controversies Around Waldorf in the French General Press

*Bérengère Kolly*

### Introduction

As in other European countries, France has seen a growing interest in “new” or “alternative” pedagogies over the last ten years, which has been reflected in the proliferation of so-called “alternative” schools claiming to be “inspired” by various pedagogies (Montessori, Freinet, Steiner-Waldorf, democratic schools, schools in the wilderness, but also homeschooling). Generally speaking, these pedagogies do not receive good press: in a context where teaching in schools remains very traditional, they are generally accused of increasing inequalities, of being aimed only at a privileged part of the population, of favouring the “*entre-soi*” or of accentuating the commercial exploitation of education. However, the treatment of the three main representatives of “alternative” pedagogies is still different.

The pedagogy of Freinet (Élise and Célestin) is undoubtedly the great loser, remaining circumscribed to a “militant minority” (Viaud, 2017, p. 132) despite a discreet craze in the direction of “cooperative pedagogy” and recent serious academic publications on the Vence school (Go & Riondet, 2020). Little criticised, but also poorly known, its pedagogy is present in the pedagogical milieu but very little in the media landscape.

Montessori pedagogy, on the other hand, is the big winner of this wave. It has come back into fashion in France thanks to the publication of a popular work claiming to be far removed from Montessori, *Les lois naturelles de l'enfant* [The Natural Laws of the Child] (Alvarez, 2016). This pedagogy has been widely criticised in educational circles in recent years for its link to Catholicism, for its controversial relationship with fascism in the 1930s, but also, in a more contemporary way by sociologists of education, for promoting “performance” elitism or the commercial exploitation of education. Academic publications are recent, few are interested in concrete practices, and pedagogy is absent from teacher training (of public, state schools). It is nevertheless linked to identifiable practices, benefiting from the general public’s supposed aura of scientific blessing by neuroscience.

The Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy is much less well-known to the general public and is absent not only from teacher training courses in the public



sector but also from the academic field.<sup>1</sup> Criticism of their possible sectarian abuses regularly appears in the public debate, in a French context which, on the one hand, strictly separates the State and the Churches and, on the other hand, has specific legislation in the fight against sectarian abuses.

This chapter proposes to study the particular relationship that France has with Steiner-Waldorf schools by studying its image in the press in the period 2001–2021. The aim is not to write an chapter on the practices of these schools nor to address the difficult question of “heritage” or the “variations” (Chalmel, 2017, pp. 10, 12) of Steiner’s conceptions in education. Rather, it is to consider the content of a reception in the general press that emphasises its versatility, its entanglement with local and political issues, and its lack of pedagogical questioning.

Choosing the press as a means of identifying the French reception of Steiner-Waldorf can be justified by the current absence of academic discourse on this educational proposal. Like Montessori until a few years ago, Steiner is not discussed in the context of French research (unlike other national contexts), in favour of more general discussions on “alternative pedagogies,” which is another point of view, more general (for example, Wagnon, 2018).

Of course, such a choice remains incomplete and has its own biases: the general press does not reflect the reception within the networks of pedagogical activism; it does not account for actual practices or receptions by practitioners and schools; it has a media bias, notably the hype (for example, around biodynamic wine in 2017–2018), but also the appetite for polemics and controversies. Finally, it involves working on a fairly small number of articles (on average, about 20 per year). Consequently, the aim here is to describe one reception of pedagogy in France.

This chapter comprises 495 articles published over 20 years, from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2021, taken from the *Europresse* database using the keywords “Steiner-Waldorf” and “anthroposophy.” As a counterpoint, a few articles from 2022 and from newspapers that are not included in the database in question, particularly in 2021, a year of great controversy, are added. All the articles from the national and local press were first selected without restriction, then classified according to their themes and contents and analysed quantitatively (in the form of graphs in particular) and qualitatively.

The articles come from major national dailies reflecting the entire political spectrum: *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *La Croix*, *L’Humanité*,

1 There have been two scientific publications in recent years (Husser, 2019; Choné, 2016) and one book presentation (Chalmel, 2017). Some thinkers consider that Steiner cannot be classified as a pedagogue. The possibility of an academic discourse is also made difficult by the polarisation and judicialisation of the debates, with many positions leading to libel suits or public blacklisting. A former anthroposophist, Grégoire Perra, a former Steiner-Waldorf school pupil and teacher, regularly takes up the pen to denounce the indoctrination practices considered to be consubstantial with these schools (Perra & Feytit, 2021).

*Les Échos*, *Le Parisien-aujourd'hui en France*. The weeklies are often more critical: *Le Point*, *L'Express*, *Télérama*, *L'Obs*, *Valeurs Actuelles*, *Marianne*, *La Vie*, the monthly *Le Monde diplomatique*. For the regional press (daily), we find, for the west, *Ouest-France*, *Sud-Ouest*, *Télégramme*, *Le journal de Saône et Loire*, *La Charente Libre*, *Presse Océan*; for the east, *Le Progrès*, *L'Est Républicain*, *Le Bien Public*; for the centre, *La Montagne*, *La Nouvelle République du Centre Ouest*, *Le Berry Républicain*; for the south, *La Dépêche du Midi*, *L'Indépendant*, *La Nouvelle République des Pyrénées*, *La Provence*, *Midi Libre*; for the north, *L'Union*; for Corsica, *Corse Matin*. As the *Europresse* database does not include *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, this region, which is often presented as the cradle of Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy (mainly because of its geographical and cultural proximity to Germany), is not represented, which is a shortcoming here.

This reception by the press is interesting in that it seems to take place in two stages: first, a period of curiosity and interest, uncritical, which turns then from 2018 onwards into a series of denunciations and controversies, without seeming to raise any real fundamental pedagogical or educational questions: the relationship with anthroposophy, the actual practices of the schools, the training or networks from which these schools recruit, and the ethics of the educators. The particularity of this reception is that it seems to talk about pedagogy without ever really talking about it: if we disregard the very general speeches that can be applied to any pedagogy and the contributions concerning themes other than schools as such, Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy is in reality only very rarely addressed by the press.

We first study the French specificities allowing us to grasp the context, in particular the framework of the law on secularism and the fight against sectarian aberrations, while establishing an initial portrait of Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy in 2022. We then study the reception of the pedagogy in the press in two stages: a first stage that began about 2010 and was rather positive and curious until 2017 and a second that was much more critical from 2018 onwards, with the Nyssen affair (Minister of Culture accused of links with anthroposophy) and the shutdown of the school in Bagnères-de-Bigorre in 2021.

### **Context: A Specific French Case?**

The vast majority of pupils in France (around 12.5 million pupils, aged 6–16 and 3–16 from 2019) are educated in the free, secular public system. Pupils can be enrolled in schools under contract with the State (which covers one or more teachers' salaries in exchange for compliance with the curriculum and secularism, despite the recognition of the specific character of the schools). Most of these schools under contract are Catholic education schools and contain about 2 million pupils. Finally, there are “non-contract” schools that have no contract with the State and whose opening depends on the prefects and local authorities, mainly according to conditions of security, health guarantees, and the risk or otherwise of disturbance to public order. Health and

educational inspections are carried out every year. French law changed in 2018 to further regulate these schools; in 2021, 73,000 pupils were enrolled in non-contractual schools, including primary and secondary schools,<sup>2</sup> which is 0.6% of the total number of pupils. We must then add, for the French case, at least two specificities.

### *Secularism “à la Française”*

The first specificity is the secularism of 1905, supplemented by the law of 2004, which implies the philosophical and religious neutrality of teachers, the relegation of religious convictions outside the school (with the exception of the teaching of *religious facts* that may be the subject of a scientific study in history classes), as well as the prohibition of conspicuous religious signs for pupils within the school premises. As pedagogies are frequently linked to philosophical (not to, say, religious) convictions, their place in public schools becomes problematic, unless they are emptied of their philosophical substratum. Moreover, this secularism should be linked to a very political and intense opposition between public, free and secular schools, and private, paying, and often denominational schools (the main player in public schools being Catholic schools under contract with the State). Moreover, behind a “pedagogical” battle, political and territorial issues are sometimes at stake, with some public schools outside the contractual framework attracting a valuable school population in depopulated rural areas.

Secularism presupposes the neutrality of education and, therefore, according to this conception, the possibility of mixing and blending pupils from different religions or philosophies. It is an affirmed conception of school as one of the crucibles of nation building, of national “fraternity.” As a result, non-contracted schools, even more than contracted schools, are accused of “communitarianism” and secession from the national body. Thus a Steiner school was accused in 2006 by a detractor of making the “choice of a real school ‘apartheid’ consisting in putting children outside society,” an ideological choice “going against the values of the Republic [. . .] where all children are invited to rub shoulders with each other while respecting cultural, philosophical, religious or social origins, in short, secularism” (*La Nouvelle République du Centre Ouest*, 6 mai 2006).

### *Fight Against Sectarian Abuses*

The second French specificity lies in the fight against sectarian abuses, which also stems from the 1905 law (which protects freedom of conscience). The State set up a body in 1996, *Miviludes* [Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Aberrations], which has been attached to the

2 Figures reported in *La Nouvelle République du centre*, 10 November 2021.

*Ministry of the Interior* since 2020.<sup>3</sup> This mission, which can be contacted by citizens, provides information, prevention and coordination of the repression of sectarian phenomena (with a broader definition)<sup>4</sup> and produces an annual report that is generally widely reported in the media.

Children, who are particularly vulnerable, are the subject of a specific section, with particular attention paid to the phenomena of isolation from the family, psychological and physical abuse, isolation from the outside world, and immersion in an exclusive ideology. *Miviludes* recalls that sectarian practices are also associated with a refusal of conventional health practices (refusal of vaccination in particular), homeschooling or schooling outside the contractual framework, ideological isolation, and truncated education, rejecting science or history in favour of a “mythical discourse.” Thus “the fear of the other, the excessive veneration of the teacher” are all “symptoms of an education which, instead of making the child free, enslaves and diminishes the possibilities open to him.”

These points of attention justify, in particular, that non-contractual schools should be subject to special surveillance, in the name of the rights of the child, for a “potential risk” and not necessarily a “proven risk,” in the name of the particular vulnerability of children and the “loss of educational opportunities” that sectarian abuses impose on the destiny of children. In this sense, the reports published each year aim to raise public awareness of “movements whose actions carry the risk of sectarian aberrations” and to report on referrals made by citizens.<sup>5</sup> In other words, because some of them claim to belong to a specific group or have specific convictions,

3 This *Interministerial Mission* was created in 1996 (at the time when the Solar Temple sect was rampant) after an alarming report by the socialist deputy Alain Vivien (1983) and took the name of *Interministerial Observatory on Sects*, then *Interministerial Mission for Combating Sects* in 1998. The fact that it drew up lists of movements as “sects,” pointing out the doctrines and not just the actions, posed a problem in terms of individual freedoms; for this reason, the Mission was replaced by *Miviludes* in 2002, the latter tackling “sectarian aberrations” rather than sects.

4 “It is a deviation from the freedom of thought, opinion or religion that undermines public order, laws or regulations, fundamental rights, security or integrity of persons. It is characterised by the use, by an organised group or by an isolated individual, whatever its nature or activity, of pressure or techniques aimed at creating, maintaining or exploiting a state of psychological or physical subjection in a person, depriving him or her of some of his or her free will, with harmful consequences for that person, his or her entourage or for society,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20230803192221/www.miviludes.interieur.gouv.fr/quest-ce-quune-d%C3%A9rive-sectaire> (memento from 3 August 2023).

5 The 2021 report of *Miviludes*, published on 3 November 2022, reported a 33.6% increase in referrals from citizens, and highlighted an increase in sectarian aberrations in France on several levels: Gurus operating on the internet in the context of conspiracy thinking, “unconventional” healthcare practices, personal development; it should be noted that many referrals concern Christian (293), Buddhist (26), Hindu (16), Muslim (10), Jewish (3), Jehovah’s Witnesses (99), the Church of Scientology, (33) and anthroposophy (31), <https://web.archive.org/web/20230821212535/www.miviludes.interieur.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/publications/>

non-contractual schools are criticised for their inability to address everyone and their refusal to play their role as a school, i.e. according to the tradition of the Enlightenment, in order to protect freedom of conscience and thought and to educate people in critical thinking.

However, not all so-called “alternative” pedagogies are criticised in the same way, and it is mainly the Steiner-Waldorf schools (in the galaxy of “alternative pedagogies”) that are for the time being pointed out as being the potential site of sectarian aberrations (in particular in the latest 2021 report by *Miviludes*, published on 3 November 2022, which devotes four pages to anthroposophy and Steiner-Waldorf schools). Montessori schools were concerned in the case of a teacher in 1996,<sup>6</sup> but this pedagogy remains generally protected from accusations of sectarian aberrations, as does Freinet pedagogy. This is not the case for Steiner-Waldorf schools, which are regularly reported – not sufficiently so according to their detractors, who have been organising themselves for several years in France to denounce their practices, through publications (Perra & Feytit, 2021) or a dedicated website.<sup>7</sup>

### *Steiner-Waldorf Education in France in 2022*

At the end of 2022, the Federation of Steiner Schools announced 19 “labelled” schools. The schools currently in operation seem to have been created in two main waves after the Second World War. The first historical wave, until the early 1980s, includes ten schools still in operation. The only three schools currently under contract with the State are the *Michaël School* in the Koenigshoffen district of Strasbourg, founded in 1946; the *Perceval School* in Chatou (west of Paris), founded in 1957; and the *Verrières-le-Buisson School*, founded in 1977, but with its roots in a school founded in Paris in 1955. (See Figure 6.1.) In addition to these three contract schools, seven other schools were founded, between 1970 and 1985, in Troyes (1973), *Saint-Genis-Laval* near Lyon (1976), *Saint-Menoux* in the Allier (1979), *Colmar* (1982), and *Jurançon* (1980), the latter having the particularity of being initially based on a team of farmers working in biodynamics. The school *Les Boutons d’Or in Éguilles* near Aix-en-Provence (1981) and the school in Sorgues (1987) were also added.

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francais/MIVILUDES-RAPPORT2021\_web\_%2027\_04\_2023%20\_0.pdf (memento from 21 August 2023).

6 In 1996, a Montessori teacher at the *Planète Bleue School* in Peilloneix in Haute-Savoie was suspected of links with the Order of the Solar Temple. This sect was responsible for two massacres in 1994 and 1995, a child previously enrolled at the *Planète Bleue School* having died in one of them. The school closed down following the scandal in 1996. The press spoke of sectarian “infiltration,” unlike Steiner-Waldorf, where sectarian drift is often considered intrinsic to the pedagogy.

7 Also held by Grégoire Perra: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230803192550/https://veritesteiner.wordpress.com/> (memento from August 3 2023).

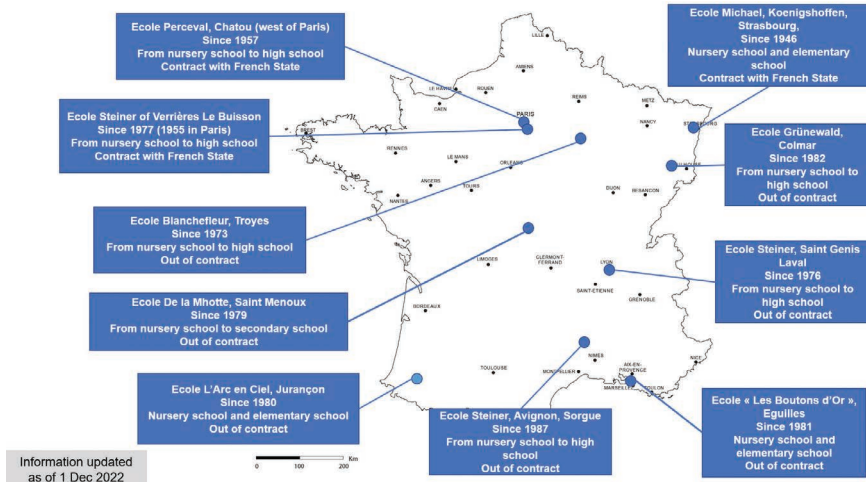


Figure 6.1 First wave of schools still in operation (1957–1987).

To this first wave should be added three schools founded in the 1990s: the *Chant'Arise School* near Toulouse (1993), the *Caminarem School* in Alès (1995), and the *Grünewald School* in Colmar (1996).

The second wave is more recent, starting in the 2000s. The schools in this wave are part of a more general movement to create alternative schools, many of which claim to be inspired by several pedagogies and not all of which are labelled. Four schools begun in the 2000s and currently certified are in operation: the “alternative kindergarten” *Le Jardin d'Églantine*, in Paris (2002), the *Quatre Saisons School* in Challes-les-Eaux, and the “alternative” school in Mens, “*1, 2, 3 Soleil*” (the latter two born in 2005); there is also the *Trois Cailloux School* in Resson near Nancy (2011).

### Initially Praised by the Press: First Local Reception (2001–2018)

In 2011, the press began to take a closer look into the Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy, with 29 articles devoted to it (26 of which were in the local press): since 2001, the number of articles had not exceeded ten per year, with a single article published for the whole of 2008 in the local press (*Ouest France*).

### General Considerations: Schools Attracting Local Press Attention

Over the 20 years studied, the first notable fact is therefore the particularly large increase in articles devoted to Steiner-Waldorf from 2011 onwards (Figure 6.2). Publications then remain at around 40 articles per year in the following years (if we exclude the year of the various confinements in 2020). This upward curve reflects a “favourable context” (Viaud, 2017, p. 144) and

a growing interest in the public debate on alternative pedagogies and the multiplication of non-contractual schools.

However, if we differentiate between the national and local press, we can see that the increase in the number of publications first concerns the local press and only then spreads to the national press. The graph in Figure 6.3 shows this very well: the peak of publications concerns the years 2011, 2012, and 2013 in the local press.

If there is an interest in Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy, this interest is first and foremost local: i.e. until 2018, linked to the life of the schools in the territories and still linked to the new schools that are being established in the local landscape. Figure 6.4 shows that almost three-quarters of the articles (just

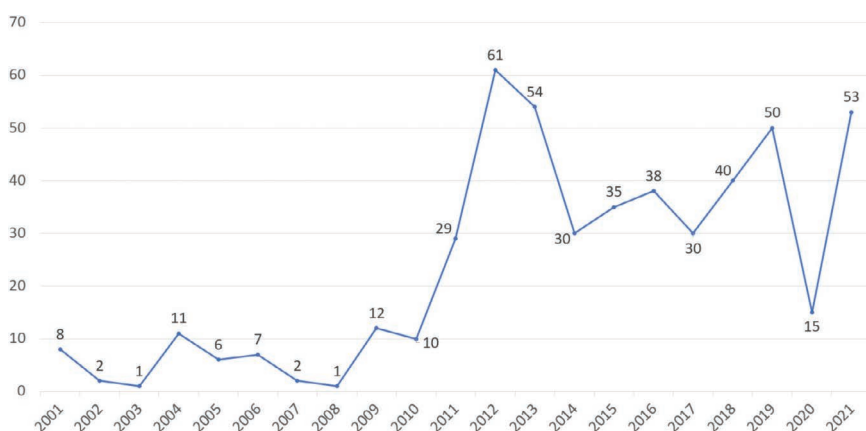


Figure 6.2 Press articles (all categories) about Steiner-Waldorf, 2001–2021.

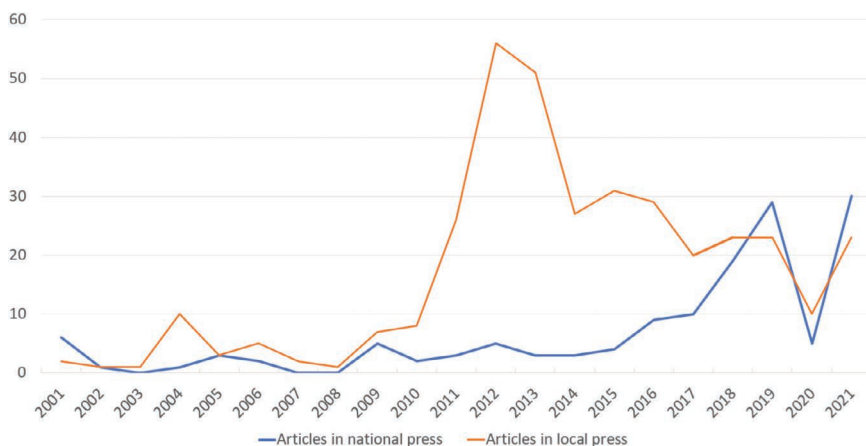


Figure 6.3 Distribution of articles between local and national press.



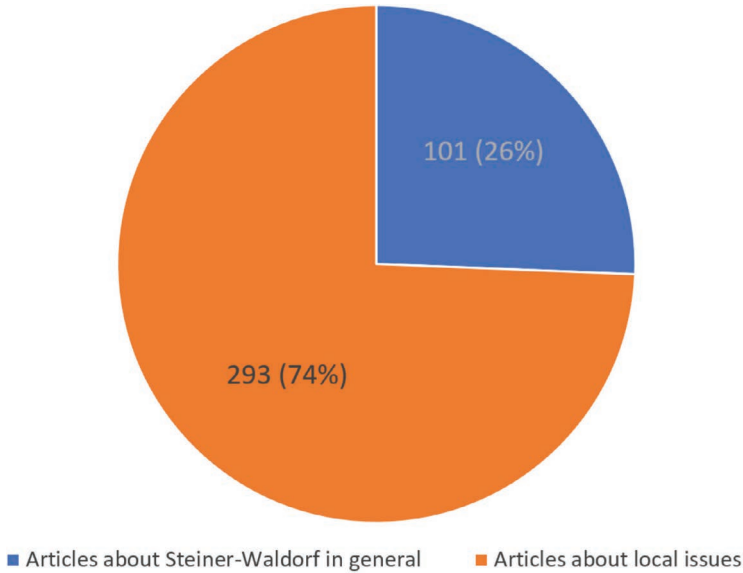


Figure 6.4 Distribution of published articles (national or general issues and local issues).

over 74%) concern local issues, with no national impact; a quarter (just under 26%) concern either Steiner pedagogy in general or matters with national impact (in particular the closure of the *Les Boutons d'Or School* in 2021 or Françoise Nyssen's *Domaine des possibles School*).

This over-representation of the local press can be explained first of all by the fact that the latter is more inclined to describe the actions of schools based in a territory and to relay announcements of conferences or “open days.” It is mainly the most recent schools that are the subject of articles, with the exception of the oldest ones, the *School of Saint Genis Laval* (begun in 1976) or the *Caminarem School* (begun in 1995). In other words, there seems to be a synergy effect between a press attracted by the novelty and the growing number of projects, schools, kindergartens or by the opening of Steiner-Waldorf workshops from 2008 onwards.

An examination of this press shows that 16 schools or kindergartens claiming to be Steiner-Waldorf were created over the entire period (only six are still in operation), as well as 15 projects that do not seem to have been followed up. There is thus a notable inflation in the number of projects based on this pedagogy,<sup>8</sup> bearing in mind that 80% of them did not come to fruition or were aborted in the first year of operation (Figure 6.5) without it being known exactly why.<sup>9</sup>

8 Not all of them claim to belong strictly to Steiner-Waldorf, especially from 2015.

9 A few clues are sometimes mentioned: generally financial concerns but also relational difficulties within the teams.

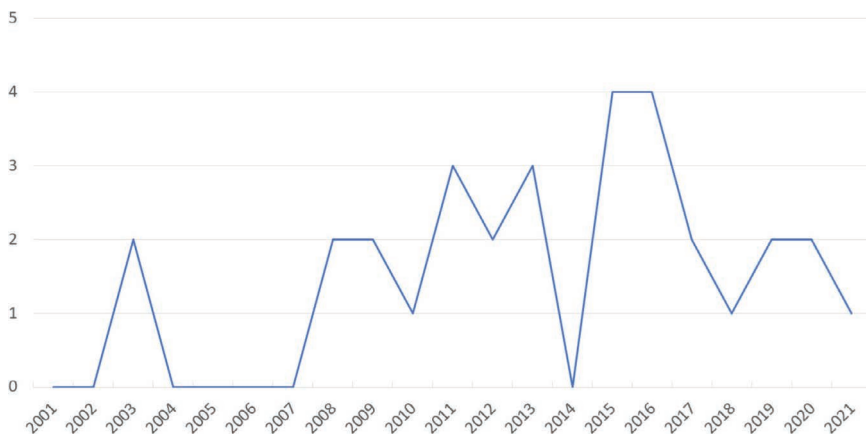


Figure 6.5 School or kindergarten start-ups or projects sufficiently advanced to appear in the local press: 80% of them do not succeed.

The press insists on the novelty of these schools “like no other,” as shown by these headlines: *Une école qui mise sur la pédagogie Waldorf* (*La Dépêche*, 17 November 2014); *Une approche spécifique de l’enfant* (*La Provence*, 1 December 2015), *Steiner-Waldorf: venez découvrir une école pas à tout à fait comme les autres* (*Le Progrès*, 17 March 2016), *Une école pas comme les autres est ouverte sur les hauteurs de la commune* (*Midi Libre*, 13 September 2017). Some elements of originality are recurrent, such as the link to nature or ecology and manual and artistic expression, but also the senses or DIY: “building a hut is part of the programme because the programme is simply to live and flourish” (*Ouest France*, 1 September 2004). The press sometimes insists on the refusal of competition or the presence of the international and foreign languages. The idea of “cardinal festivals” reappears regularly but without explanation; twice, the place of “awakening religious feeling” is mentioned in a more discreet manner (*Le Progrès*, 17 March 2016).

The views are generally positive: “Here, the learning is certainly unconventional but a priori very relevant” (*Est Républicain*, 6 September 2014); some articles emphasise that these schools provide a school alternative for non-compliant pupils, “in difficulty” with traditional schooling (and this argument is sometimes put forward by the *Federation of Steiner Schools* to thwart the few accusations of sectarian aberrations). Eurythmy is described, rarely, as an “art form” which has “already given evidence of the important role it can play in beneficial and restorative activities” (*Le Télégramme*, 17 June 2007).

### *Lack of Discourse on Pedagogy*

The articles are of unequal size but sometimes very numerous for the same school. The school *Les Trois Cailloux* (founded in 2011 in Lorraine) is the

subject of no fewer than 46 articles between 2011 and 2015, and 15 articles in 2012 alone. However, despite this large number, the daily life of the classes is never the subject of a report: it is always a matter of reported remarks, interviews with parents, teachers, or possibly former pupils. Moreover, the theoretical foundations are never described, except in very general terms. Anthroposophy, although it was originally the basis of Rudolf Steiner's educational thinking (see Steiner, 1922/1974; Ogletree, 1974; Uhrmacher, 1995, 2004; Marshak, 1997), is never mentioned in these local articles, and only one article deals with biodynamics.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the pedagogical description is so general that it could be applied to any practice: "Respect for the child's rhythm, social integration and openness to the world" (*Ouest France*, 1 September 2004); "provide more time and space for free play in early childhood facilities" (*Midi Libre*, 8 April 2011); "articulate intellectual teaching and the exercise of artistic and manual activities" (*La Provence*, 30 May 2014). The press generally insists on the blossoming of the child, often in laudatory terms: "An original, humanistic pedagogy, open to the world and respectful of the different stages of the child from infancy to adulthood" (*Est Républicain*, 28 May 2010); "a school where the child discovers that he or she is unique, learns with joy and enthusiasm, and lives in harmony with nature, others and the world" (*Presse Océan*, 11 March 2011). These elements hardly seem to be specifically related to Steiner practices: we find equally vague descriptions of Montessori or Freinet. In other words, the "alternative pedagogies" are described here according to the same generalising model, including respect for the child's rhythm, an appreciation of nature, the role of the senses, etc., without addressing other questions that would have been just as interesting: what is the place of the imagination, and why, how, and what are the limits or ethical safeguards on the part of the educator? What precise form does the teaching take (reading, writing, mathematics) and according to what techniques? That is to say: are we in the presence of a pedagogy with specific techniques or, more broadly, of an education (or indoctrination) for some?<sup>11</sup>

A possible explanation for this lack of interest in pedagogy itself is maybe linked to the interests of the local press. There are more articles about the activities organised by the school outside school hours than about the pedagogy or the practices themselves, as if the press seeks to mirror the life of the territories in which the schools are located. Reporting on events such as Christmas markets, open doors, or Saint Martin's Day, journalists sometimes do not even mention pedagogy, as schools become local associations like any

10 Biodynamics according to Rudolf Steiner, *Midi Libre*, 5 December 2011.

11 The English-language literature seems to propose the idea of "education" (e.g. Uhrmacher, 1995), whereas in France the word "pédagogie" is put forward, without any real argument for such a term.

other. An article in *Midi Libre*, presenting the Christmas market organised by the Caminarem school at the end of 2011, wrote:

Throughout the day, you can enjoy pancakes, hot chestnuts, coffee and mulled wine. And win in the tombola, with prizes chosen from the various stalls or houses in the gingerbread village! The day will end with traditional dances for all, accompanied by the school parents' band.

(*Midi Libre*, 1 December 2011)

However, we could interpret this very general description as a symptom of the fact that, as Ullrich points out, Steiner's "ideas" had "an extraordinary and fruitful practical impact" but that his theoretical writings are distrusted. For this reason, pedagogy would only be displayed in terms of the "common sense principles that have been the basis of modern pedagogy since Comenius and Pestalozzi" (Ullrich, 2000, pp. 1, 12), which would amount to a form of alteration or smoothing of the pedagogical discourse.

#### *National Press Relay: Praise and Curiosity*

Following this first wave of local articles, the national press took over, focusing on this pedagogy from 2015 to 2016. Similarly, the tone is laudatory and curious. *Le Monde* devoted a dossier in April 2012 to public schools outside the contractual framework<sup>12</sup> and a double article on 27 and 29 August 2015: the main argument consists in describing the parents of children educated in this type of school as disappointed by the traditional system. The articles, which are more in-depth and precise than those published so far in the local press, are also more nuanced. The first article focuses on the three cycles of schooling – but without any theoretical reference: the body (play), the soul (wonder), and thought (abstraction). Beauty is the guiding thread of the article, reminding us that throughout his life, the child "models, handles, draws. When he is older, he sculpts, lumberjacks and forges." Sectarian aberrations are mentioned but as obstacles to the development of schools:

It must be said that the handful of schools attached to the movement have suffered from the esoteric – sectarian, some argue – image linked to the current of thought and spirituality developed by Rudolf Steiner under the name 'anthroposophy'. Their mention in a report by a commission of enquiry into sects at the end of the 1990s did not help.

(*Le Monde*, 27 August 2015).

12 *Les écoles privées hors contrat, une galaxie éclectique à la marge du système* [Non-Contractual Public Schools, an Eclectic Galaxy on the Fringes of the System] and *Ce choix ne s'est pas fait en un jour* [This Choice Was Not Made in a Day] (*Le Monde*, 25 and 27 April 2012).

Finally, the same newspaper devotes – and this is important for the polemics that will follow – three laudatory articles to the school run by Françoise Nyssen, director of the publishing house *Actes Sud*, in Alès, the *Domaine du possible*.<sup>13</sup> The article of 10 October 2016, in particular, gives a much more precise presentation of the daily pedagogy: the pupils are described in their classrooms, and there are some more precise elements of concrete organisation. The argument of the alternative to the national education system comes up again: the article criticises the classical school, “thought to select a meritocratic elite, not to favour the blossoming of each child,” generating a “mess,” and it underlines the need for an alternative to “move the lines.” The name of the director and the Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy, as well as the place of spirituality, are indicated. Moral and academic guarantors are mentioned to indicate that any drift is constrained in advance. The journalist sought the support of the rector of the Aix-Marseille academy and the president of *Miviludes*, who is quoted as saying that “at a time when we are trying to renew pedagogy, experiments of this type are useful.”

Here again, the movement is general and concerns all “alternative pedagogies.” *Montessori, Freinet, Steiner-Waldorf: methods that have proved their worth* was the title of the weekly *Télérama* on 30 September 2017. Describing the pedagogies cited in a few lines, the article, with regard to Waldorf, only mentions anthroposophy; it presents this practice as “humanistic” and leaving a “large place for artistic, scientific and manual work” while “also refocus[ing] children on their interiority and their creativity.” He cites the practice of the unicycle in the *Colmar* school. Overall, the argument at work is that of a valorisation of “other” ways of schooling and teaching. The craze concerns the entire political spectrum, since the more conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* saw, in the same year, non-contractual schools as “a laboratory for the school” (*Le Figaro*, 15 September 2017). The article, which quotes Anne Coffinier, director of *La Fondation pour l'École*, a particularly conservative institution campaigning for the “free” school in France, values Steiner less than the very idea of alternative pedagogy.

It is therefore quite possible to make the hypothesis that Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy benefitted, during this first period (2011–2017), from the general craze around alternative schools, like the media hype around Céline Alvarez.<sup>14</sup>

13 *Le Domaine du possible, une école pour “faire bouger les lignes”* [The Realm of the Possible, a School to “Move the Lines”], *Le Monde*, 10 October 2016, followed on 11 October by an article entitled *La possibilité d'une école* [The Possibility of a School]; then a long article devoted to the director who became Minister of Culture on 13 September 2017, *Françoise Nyssen, une Arlésienne rue de Valois* [Françoise Nyssen, an Arlesian at the Streets of Valois]. We come back to this school later in the text.

14 As mentioned previously, she was the subject of a very large number of laudatory interviews and articles, before journalist and historian Laurence De Cock made a very critical investigation about her in May 2017. The press then largely disassociated itself from the educator and the Montessori pedagogy.

## Break-Up of 2018 and Schools in Turmoil

### *End of the Honeymoon: An Increasingly Critical Press*

Between 2018 and 2021, there was a gradual reversal in the press, which is described next. A total of 41 articles published during this period can be considered critical or very critical of Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy (out of 158 articles published, i.e. a quarter), anthroposophy, or related care practices related to anthroposophy. These criticisms came at a time when the local press was gradually losing interest in Steiner pedagogy, mainly due to the closure of several schools between 2015 and 2018. At the same time as the local press was giving less coverage to this pedagogy, the national press was largely relaying these depreciatory articles.

The first reason we can put forward is the end of the honeymoon between the press and “alternative schools” between 2018 and 2019. *Le Monde*, which until now had published rather positive articles on this issue, reports on non-contractual schools and their possible abuses (“denominational abuses, pedagogical indigencies, commercial abuses”) in an article dated 31 August 2018. A few weeks earlier, on 3 July 2018, *Le Figaro* ran the headline: *Écoles hors contrat: derrière le fort engouement, parfois la désillusion* [Non-Contractual Schools: Behind the Hype, Sometimes Disillusionment]. *Télérama*, which had headlined in 2017 that alternative pedagogies had “proved their worth,” proposed an article entitled *La folie Montessori* [Montessori Madness] (*Télérama*, 24 April 2021) in which the lack of political vision and consumerism are put forward as the main reasons for the success of this pedagogy to the detriment of others.

Although the press seems to be surprised by these aberrations, these phenomena were largely foreseeable, since these schools, whatever the pedagogy practiced, are faced with problems of management (often parental, leading to internal crises), funding (based on the families, who pay a high price), and training (the teachers sometimes launch themselves without any training and “mix” pedagogies in approximate practices), not to mention the effects of commercial windfalls. This discovery of the problems by the press – after an infatuation without much hindsight – could thus be interpreted as a symptom of the lack of knowledge of this field by the press and the revelation of these problems, which have remained the prerogative of militants until now.

In this new disenchantment between the press and alternative pedagogies, Steiner-Waldorf schools are nevertheless often only mentioned but are always associated with the denunciation of “sectarian abuses.” The fundamental questions are still not addressed. What concrete practices do these schools offer? Are they comparable from one school to another? What ethics do they propose for educators? What should we think of schools that claim to be inspired by Steiner-Waldorf or by “mixed” pedagogies as different as Freinet, Montessori, Steiner, or even “the school in the forest”?

Other articles remain that deal with other considerations, such as outbreaks of measles at alternative, religious, or Steiner schools (*Le Monde*,

*L'Obs*). *Le Monde* specifies that these schools are based “on a controversial movement of thought that notably involves the refusal of vaccination” (*Le Monde*, 31 August 2018). Even *L'Est Républicain*, until now particularly laudatory of the *Trois Cailloux* school, wonders in an article of 17 May 2018 whether Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy “does not delay basic learning.” It should be noted here that, once again, Steiner schools are involved in the general movement to distance themselves from all alternative schools, Montessori in particular.

The second reason is the change in legislation around alternative schools from 2018 onwards through the “Gatel law.”<sup>15</sup> This legislation increases the conditions for the opening of such schools (e.g. regarding the safety and accessibility of the premises, the professional experience of the head teacher) and gives more room to local authorities to oppose such openings. It can be seen as a reaction to the decline in the number of pupils for public schools<sup>16</sup> and to the multiplication of “non-contract” schools, including Islamist schools in the context of the attacks of 2015.<sup>17</sup> The Gatel law provides for an annual control verifying the transmission of the “common base of knowledge and skills” and implies that the public institution is looking at the methods used, ensuring that there is no “disturbance of public order.”

#### *Break-Up of the Nyssen Affair: Steiner vs. Marx?*

The third reason – which constitutes a turning point – is political and has to do with the person of Françoise Nyssen, director of the publishing house *Actes Sud* and founder of the school *Le Domaine des possibles* in 2014. This school has been directed since its creation by Henri Dahan, former general delegate of the Steiner-Waldorf federation in France.<sup>18</sup> Françoise Nyssen was appointed Minister of Culture in the first government following the election of Emmanuel Macron in May 2017 (Édouard Philippe government). The Minister quickly became disgruntled for political reasons and for reasons related to the way she conducted her ministry.

In the summer of 2018, *Le Monde Diplomatique* published a series of three articles, authored by Jean-Baptiste Malet, which were particularly critical of anthroposophy; they made public the links between Françoise Nyssen and members of the anthroposophical society, Praxède and Henri Dahan

15 Law of 13 April 2018 known as the Gatel Law, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230804213502/www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000036798673/> (memento from 4 August 2023).

16 An article in *Le Monde* on 31 August 2018 reported a loss of 30,000 pupils for the public system for the start of the 2017 school year: *Hors contrat: comment comprendre le succès des écoles alternatives?* [Out of Contract: How Do We Understand the Success of Alternative Schools?].

17 In particular, a school in Toulouse, which had created a heated debate, but also a school in Troyes, in 2016, which had been the subject of an administrative ban.

18 The school opened in response to a family tragedy. The eldest child of the Nyssen family, described by the family as unsuitable for school, committed suicide in 2012 at the age of 18.



and Bodo von Plato (then a member of the *Goetheanum's* board). Entitled *L'anthroposophie, discrète multinationale de l'ésotérisme* [Anthroposophy, a Discreet Multinational of Esotericism], *La Société théosophique, ou le mythe de "l'insurrection des consciences"* [The Theosophical Society, or the Myth of the "Insurrection of Conscience"] (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1 July 2018), or *Anthroposophie* [anthroposophy] (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1 August 2018), they are combined with a highly critical portrait of Pierre Rabhi, also presented as having links with members of the government and Françoise Nyssen (*Le système Pierre Rabhi* [The System Pierre Rabhi], 1 August 2018). Founder of the *Colibris* movement, poet, lecturer, but also a farmer advocating permaculture techniques and calling on society to be "sober," Rabhi is described as someone "inspired" by the principles of anthroposophy. Alternative schools were not far away, as his daughter, Sophie Rabhi, initially trained in Montessori pedagogy, was setting up the "Hameau des Buis" between 2006 and 2021, an eco-village where there is an alternative school, *La ferme des enfants* [The Children's Farm].

The first article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* begins by describing a few elements of Rudolf Steiner's life before moving on to describe the financial "empire" of anthroposophy, some of the philosophical elements that characterise it (a "science of the spirit" rooted in a glorification of nature and the *volk* [people/folk], a "syncretism between esotericism, idealistic philosophy, Christian mysticism, *völkisch* [ethnic] paganism"). After quoting some of Steiner's "strange" ("bizarre," in French) statements, the article describes the "esoteric rituals" of biodynamics or the links to Nazism and anthroposophical medicine.

Because anthroposophists generally avoid the racism and oddities [*bizareries*] that are scattered throughout Steiner's work, parents of Steiner school pupils, clients of anthroposophical banks and farmers practising biodynamics find themselves linked to a spiritual current whose history, esoteric foundations and even the risks of sectarian aberrations to which former anthroposophical followers testify, are generally unknown to them.

The article stresses the mode of dissemination by "germination," i.e. the constitution of medical, educational, economic, or agricultural islands aiming to "spiritually regenerate individuals"; it also stresses the conservative political dimension inherent in this thinking: regenerating consciousness and not changing society, refusing social or managerial contestation in the name of predestination; in other words, "standing out from the norm in order to establish one's credibility, without contesting the structures." The article thus mentions, as an example of germination, the anthroposophical membership of a member of the *European Parliament* and founder of the Greens in Germany, a former bank manager; it then highlights Françoise Nyssen's links with the Steiner movement. The text ends with a description of the "Advent

spiral” ritual organised in the school in an “occultist atmosphere.” If the objective is political, it goes beyond the Minister of Culture alone: it is a question of denouncing, behind the various movements advancing the notion of degrowth or sobriety, “recycling of reactionary ideologies” (*Derrière la décroissance, une multitude de chapelles* [Behind Degrowth, a Multitude of Chapels], *Le Monde*, 3 December 2018).

If these articles are therefore about pedagogy, it is in favour of a description on another, political level, aimed at the Minister, the young government in place, and, beyond that, the so-called alterglobalist spheres that are not explicitly socialist or communist or even anti-communist (Ariès, 2001, p. 112 et seq.), in which Steiner’s idea of “triarticulation” [The Threefold Social Order] has spread widely (Choné, 2016). The article castigating “the Pierre Rabhi system” is very clear on this point: the Steiner-Waldorf schools are embedded in political issues, those of a network refusing social subversion for a “third way made of tradition, authenticity, spiritual quest and true relationship with nature.”

The breakdown of the great political hopes brings an old idea back into fashion: to change the world, it would be enough to change oneself and reconnect with the nature of the links destroyed by modernity.

(*Le système Pierre Rabhi*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1 August 2018).

### *Schools in Turmoil*

These articles were particularly read and commented on and were the cause, according to *La Provence*, of the forced resignation of the director of the *Domaine des possibles* school, leading to the resignation of two employees. The press widely covers the facts, and as the newspaper *La Croix* points out, the affair “reopens the debate on Steiner pedagogy” (19 September 2018). *Valeurs actuelles*, a very conservative newspaper that never deals with alternative pedagogies, was the first to report on 19 July with the headline *Le naufrage de la maison Nyssen* [The Shipwreck of the Nyssen House]. *La Provence* dealt with the controversy in two articles on 18 September, which were reprinted in *Corse Matin* (*À Arles, l’école de Françoise Nyssen dans la tourmente* [Françoise Nyssen’s Arles School in Turmoil]; *Oui, il y a eu manipulation* [Yes, There Was Manipulation]), and then *Libération*, which first reported on the Nyssen affair (*Polémique: Nyssen se sépare de son école alternative* [Controversy: Nyssen Pulls Out of Her Alternative School], *Libération*, 19 September 2018). From the Nyssen affair, the articles extend to anthroposophy (*Is anthroposophy a sect?*, *Libération*, 30 October 2018), to the galaxy of degrowth and its links to the extreme right, and therefore to schools without a contract – *Le Monde* worries in particular about whether these schools “represent a danger” by emphasising their eclecticism (*Le Monde*, 31 August 2018).

This time, the few articles with schools in the headlines focus directly on the schools' practical difficulties: that this *Domaine des possibles* school would only offer a single pedagogy (without saying so) rather than a mix of different techniques; that there would be gaps in the pupils' knowledge, particularly for pupils in difficulty; finally, that there would be "pressure from anthroposophists" in favour of "anti-scientific" content, encouraged by the culture of secrecy (*Corse Matin*, 18 September 2018). The turnaround is such that the president of *Miviludes*, although quoted in defence in the 2016 article, is this time quoted in charge: "the assessment was disastrous: the inspectors had noted the very low level of the pupils."

Waldorf pedagogy is still not the subject of investigation, nor are the practices of the schools, nor are the philosophical foundations of Steiner's educational thinking, but the schools are involved in the debate. From 2018 onwards, they only appear in the press in connection with controversies, court cases, or polemics. The year 2019 saw the confirmation of this trend, with several scandals: the continuation of the Nyssen affair (with her resignation as Minister of Culture in October 2018); several interventions by the official Steiner association in France to assert that *No, Steiner schools are not sects* (*Le Point*, 11 June 2019) (response to an article of 29 April of the same year entitled *Anti-vaccines, cosmological delusions . . . the strange "truths" of anthroposophers*); but also legal attacks against a teacher from a Steiner school mentioning, on a YouTube channel, racist conceptions<sup>19</sup> and against Grégoire Perra, already named, whom the network of Steiner schools is suing, unsuccessfully, for libel. A school in Verrières-le-Buisson (Essonne) is being sued for three sexual assaults between children between 2017 and 2018, yet this is only the subject of an article in *Le Parisien* (21 October 2019). Criticism of biodynamics also appears and is reinforced by the accusations made against Pierre Rabhi and his thinking just after his death on 4 December 2021.<sup>20</sup>

After the pandemic, the year 2021 is marked by criticism of "alternatives" in terms of care and doctors, the refusal of vaccination, and sectarian aberrations via the internet. Schools are less directly targeted than medical

19 *Un prof Steiner fait la promotion de théories délirantes et racistes* [A Steiner Teacher Promotes Delusional and Racist Theories], *Le Point*, 27 June 2019. *Le Figaro* uses a more evasive title: *Sur YouTube, un professeur tenait une chaîne ésotérique* [A Teacher Had an Esoteric Channel on YouTube], *Le Figaro*, 9 July 2019.

20 For example, *Les Echos*, Michel Onfray: "La biodynamie est la signature d'un temps nihiliste" [Michael Onfray: "Biodynamics Is the Signature of a Nihilistic Age"], 13 December 2019. In *Le Point*, *Biodynamie: faut-il brûler la musaraigne?* [Biodynamics: Should We Burn the Shrew?], and *Les nouvelles mythologies du vin – Steiner, infusion et confusion* [The New Mythologies of Wine – Steiner, Infusion and Confusion], 23 and 27 January 2020. *Le Monde*, *L'ivresse du converti* [The Intoxication of the Convert], 17 February 2020, or *Le Figaro*, *Forces cosmiques, rituels ésotériques et êtres surnaturels: ce qui se cache derrière les vins "biodynamiques"* [Cosmic Forces, Esoteric Rituals and Supernatural Beings: What Lies behind "Biodynamic" Wines], 17 September 2021.

“alternatives” – with the exception of the closure of the *Les Boutons d’Or* school in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, another controversy, which we describe later in the chapter and which is the subject of 15 articles in *Europress*. There are no less than 14 highly critical articles, seven criticising anthroposophy, three directly linking Steiner-Waldorf and sects in general, and seven criticising anthroposophical medicine and their relationship with covid. Here are a few headlines illustrating the content of articles questioning Steiner: *Coronavirus: the ‘fake news’ virus is on the rise*; *Sectarian aberrations: when gurus ‘out-source’ themselves* (*Le Point*, 27 March, 24 October 2021); *The pandemic, a great boon for sects* (*L’Humanité*, 30 July 2021). Note that certain magazines such as *L’Express*, which had published only four articles on Steiner in 19 years (between 2001 and 2020), published no fewer than six in 2021 alone.<sup>21</sup> This pedagogy is still not questioned.

In the summer of 2021, *Le Monde* published a series of five articles on Rudolf Steiner. The first of these articles states that “Rudolf Steiner’s sulphurous aura is attached above all to his pedagogy,” but the series does not talk about pedagogy any more, focusing on Steiner’s biography and the description of the many activities linked to anthroposophy or the founder’s thought: *Le monde occulte de Rudolf Steiner* [The Occult World of Rudolf Steiner] (*Le Monde*, 13 July 2021); *And Steiner created biodynamics* (*Le Monde*, 15 July 2021); *Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy, between spiritualism, racialism and ecology* (*Le Monde*, 15 July 2021); *Rudolf Steiner, a much-discussed philosopher* (*Le Monde*, 17 July 2021); *Rudolf Steiner, architect of the round* (*Le Monde*, 19 July 2021).

### *The Bagnères-de-Bigorre Case (2021)*

In fact, the end of 2020 was marked by the publication of a series of interviews with a former anthroposophist, Grégoire Perra, who had already given interviews in the press and had maintained a website for several years to denounce the practices of Waldorf schools. These interviews, published in the book *Une vie en anthroposophie* [A Life in Anthroposophy], tackle head-on the pedagogical problems posed by these schools while taking a most firm stand against the very existence of these schools. In this book, Perra makes serious accusations against Steiner pedagogy and related practices.

21 *Meteor dust, ginger . . . The curious remedies of anthroposophists in the face of Covid* (*L’Express*, 1 February 2021); *Natalie Grams: ‘Homoeopathy has more to do with the esoteric than with nature’* (*L’Express*, 3 August 2021); *More harmful than homoeopathy: How anthroposophic medicine legitimises itself* (*L’Express*, 10 August 2021); *The drifts of anthroposophic medicine* (*L’Express*, 12 August 2021); *Anthroposophic doctors’ stinging legal setback against a whistleblower* (*L’Express*, 11 October 2021) (continuation of the Perra case); *Anthroposophists, crudivorists, evangelicals . . . Les nouvelles menaces sectaires* [Anthroposophists, Crudivorists, Evangelicals . . . The New Sectarian Threats] (*L’Express*, 22 October 2021).

He describes it as a dogmatic pedagogy masking its eschatological ideology, the imposition of vegan diets or fasts on children, esoteric and far-fetched rituals, statements aimed at cutting children off from their families, uncritical imitation, but also violence between children without the intervention of teachers in the name of “karma,” the exclusion of non-anthroposophical children, and racism. In the same vein, at the end of 2020, the *Slate.fr* website published a particularly worrying article on the management of autism in anthroposophically inspired reception centres and, in January 2021, an alarming portrait of Steiner schools,<sup>22</sup> based on the testimonies of two former mothers of children attending a Steiner school and two former teachers, including Grégoire Perra.

It is in this context that the *Boutons d’Or School*, created in 2013, was subject to an unannounced inspection in March 2021 (following two others in 2019 and 2020). The report was very critical: a group of teachers’ unions referred the matter to the *Conseil Départemental de l’Éducation Nationale* and warned the press.

Until now, the Buttercup School had received relatively little publicity. In 2014, *La Dépêche du Midi* described it as a “kindergarten unlike any other,” with specially trained “gardeners,” “activities that stimulate the child’s curiosity and imagination, allowing him to live multiple and rich experiences through free play, storytelling, singing or manual activities, among others.” The school had then not made any more news, apart from two open door announcements in 2016 and 2018 and a conference in June 2018 entitled *Children Facing Screens*,” given by a teacher from the *Colmar* school, thus testifying to the school’s anchoring in the network.

In May 2021, the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* published a long article highlighting the educational but also political impasses at work. On the pedagogical level, the inspection report underlines the lack of record-keeping, the small size of the premises, and the shortcomings in teaching, particularly in science and history-geography (*Le Monde*, 26 August 2022). *Charlie Hebdo* notes that the teachers, when questioned on this point, demonstrate “an insidious questioning of science, which is considered by the anthroposophers as just another belief.” But the political stakes are also at the centre of the concerns, with an out-of-contract school increasing in size and planning to expand at the beginning of the next school year, competing – and taking no less

22 *La pédagogie Steiner et l’anthroposophie, une vision ésotérique et dangereuse de l’autisme* [Steiner Pedagogy and Anthroposophy, an Esoteric and Dangerous Vision of Autism] (*Slate.fr*, 30 October 2020) <https://web.archive.org/web/20230804214959/www.slate.fr/story/196546/pedagogie-steiner-anthroposophie-dangereuse-enfants-autisme-mouvement-camphill> (memento from 4 August 2023); *Violences, abus, racisme: la loi du silence des écoles Steiner-Waldorf* [Violence, Abuse, Racism: The Law of Silence in Steiner-Waldorf schools] (*Slate.fr*, 4 January 2021) <https://web.archive.org/web/20230804215231/www.slate.fr/story/198667/violences-abus-racisme-enfants-ecoles-steiner-waldorf-pedagogie-alternative-anthroposophie> (memento from 4 August 2023).

than 18 pupils, according to certain press articles – from the public school which, conversely, was planning to close. This led the schoolteacher to say that it was probably a new “school war.”<sup>23</sup> The non-contractual school was also attracting a new population to this rural area, with “neo-rural” people settling around the school, along with “alternative” therapists and a number of people committed to an alternative environmentalist left, who had formed an opposition to the town hall. Each accused the other of sectarianism and conspiracy for some and of climate scepticism for others, in a post-pandemic context with particularly heated political confrontations in France around vaccines, the wearing of masks, and sanitary measures. More broadly, the political stakes also lay in whether or not to rebel against the state school, i.e. the political models underlying the anthroposophical networks and the *Fédération Pédagogie Steiner-Waldorf* [Federation of Steiner Schools].

The article generated a real “affair,” the background of which we cannot report here: in August, the public local education authority (*le Rectorat*) gave notice to parents to enrol their children elsewhere, and the school was officially closed at the beginning of the school year as an administrative measure, which was a first in France and in which the press played a leading role.

## Conclusion

This chapter did not aim to study the pedagogical practices of Steiner-Waldorf schools or to discuss the philosophical or religious foundations of this education but was limited to studying the discourse of the press. As a result, this chapter may say more about the functioning of the press than about the education in question.

The main remark we can draw from this study is that Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy is dependent on the relationship the press has not only with alternative pedagogies in general but also with the themes that are related to Steiner’s thought. For it is these that ultimately dominate: anthroposophy, specific economic networks, anthroposophic healing practices and medicine, and the political issues linked to them. Pedagogy is only very rarely discussed for its own sake, or even in relation to these branches of Steiner’s thought. In the articles, the press seems to deal with pedagogy but in fact hardly ever mentions it. When it comes to the national press, political issues take precedence; the local press deals with territorial issues and avoids substantive questions.

This particularity of a superficial treatment could be explained by the absence of an academic discourse on Steiner-Waldorf schools. A certain number of fundamental questions seem to be the prerogative of researchers. Can we treat Steiner-Waldorf as a coherent whole, which implies assimilating the schools into one another, and the word “Steiner” to a congruence of

23 The “school war” is a term traditionally used in the French context to describe the struggle between the Catholic school system and the school system of the Third Republic.



practices, a problematic statement even within a supposedly homogeneous pedagogy (Tyson, 2021)? Should we speak of pedagogy or rather of an education? Is it enough to claim to be Waldorf in order to be associated with it? How does the labelling of schools work, and how is it possible for labelled schools to declare themselves disconnected from anthroposophy? Are the abuses observed – for example, around *laissez-faire* – to be attributed to the pedagogy itself, in whole or in part, or to this type of structure (including those claiming to follow other pedagogies), where sometimes poorly trained people are in group management, often in a precarious situation and sometimes with little knowledge of what is expected of them in school or quite simply in a network of specific people? What is the ethical and deontological framework that supports such schools and their educators, and is any work being done on this issue?

If these questions are not addressed in depth, the public debate will be ill-equipped to analyse the practices of non-contractual schools and their social, human, and sometimes commercial economies in order to make a fine distinction between pedagogies and to distinguish between acceptable practices and others that are not. And with ill-equipped participants, the debate can only be polarised between all or nothing: not to worry about schools announcing that they mix three pedagogies, which seems at least problematic; conversely, to castigate from the outset the slightest less conventional practice. In other words, if we want to question the possible place of these pedagogies in the public space and the school space, in France in particular, a first step could be to take these pedagogies seriously (which does not mean adoring them) and to make them a real subject of study, leading to an exploration of their richness and their impasses.

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# 7 Waldorf Education in Slovenia

*Sanja Berčnik and Laura Rožman Krivec*

## Introduction

The beginnings of Waldorf education in Slovenia are represented by the *Društvo Kortina* [Kortina Association], founded in 1989. In 1990, the Association began offering education seminars for teachers at elementary and secondary schools. In 1991, the leadership of the association was taken over by B. Strmole Ukmar (2005), who created new organisational forms: the *Zavod za razvoj waldorfskih šol in vrtcev* [Institute for the Development of Waldorf Schools and Kindergartens in Slovenia] (ZRWŠV), the *Ajda Association and the Eurythmic Association Lepa Vida* (Društvo Kortina, 2022). From 1994 to 2003, with support of the *Ministry of Education and Sport*, the Institute carried out the programme of continuous professional development and organised lectures and seminars in the fields of anthroposophy, Waldorf education, healing education, eurythmy, biodynamic agriculture, and anthroposophical medicine.

The institute is today an umbrella organisation of Waldorf schools and kindergartens in Slovenia and acts as their association. The Institute is represented in the *European Council of Waldorf Schools* (ECSWE), in the *International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education Hague Circle*, in the *International Association* (IAO), and in the *International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens* (IASWECE). The purpose of the institution is the development, integration, and quality work of Waldorf schools and kindergartens in Slovenia, as well as the preservation and further development of the principles of Waldorf education as introduced by the original founders of the *Ljubljana Waldorf School* and developed over the years. The content basis for the operation of Waldorf kindergartens and schools is the document *Steiner Waldorf Education in Europe – A Statement of Principles and Aspirations*, adopted by the *European Council of Waldorf Schools* on 16 January 2009; the document *Key Characteristics of Waldorf Education*, adopted by the *International Forum of the Hague Circle* on 5 July 2016; and the document (for kindergartens) *Essential Characteristics of Steiner/Waldorf Education for the Child from Birth to Seven* adopted by the *International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens* (IASWECE) in May 2016. The Institute

is concerned with the supervision, consultation, training, and continuing education of Waldorf teachers and educators, development in the field of education, and the creation of conditions for the operation of Waldorf schools and kindergartens in Slovenia. Part of the institute's activities is also aimed at the lifelong education of adults. At the same time, special attention is paid to pedagogical content that helps parents (and anyone interested in topics related to children) to understand children's development, anthroposophical content lectures touching on anthroposophical themes, artistic activities, practical and movement activities (Zavod za razvoj waldorfskih šol in vrtcev Slovenije – zveza, n.d.a).<sup>1</sup>

The *Kortina Association* published three books – *Umetnost waldorfske vzgoje* [The Art of Waldorf Education] (F. Edmunds), *Vzgoja otroka v luči duhovne znanosti* [Child Education in the Light of Spiritual Science] (R. Steiner), and *Človek v družbenem redu* [Man in the Social Order] (R. Steiner) – in 2014. The publishing house within the institute began its publishing activity with the booklet *Razvoj otroka s stališča waldorfske pedagogike* [Child Development from the Perspective of Waldorf Education] and a book called *S srcem v šoli* [In School with the Heart]. In 2017, the book *Labirinti* [Labyrinths] was published, in 2018 *Zdravilne zgodbe za vedenjske izzive* [Healing Stories for Behavioral Challenges], in 2019 *Med formo in svobodo – odraščanje mladostnika and Zastrupljeno otroštvo – kako sodobni svet vpliva na naše otroke in kaj lahko storimo* [Between Form and Freedom – Growing Up an Adolescent and a Poisoned Childhood – How the Modern World Affects Our Children and What We Can Do] (Zavod za razvoj waldorfskih šol in vrtcev Slovenije – zveza, n.d.a). In addition, the magazine *Svitanje* [Dawn]–*Waldorf news* is edited, which is, as the editor Novak writes, in many ways “a community-initiated journal that brings together authors and readers interested in spiritual knowledge” (Svitanje, 2018). *Waldorfske novice and Waldorfska trobenta* [Waldorf News and Waldorf Trumpet] are published to inform parents of children enrolled at the *Ljubljana Waldorf School* (Waldorfska šola, 2022g). As part of the Journalism club at *Maribor Waldorf School*, the *Waldorfski zgovornik* [Waldorf Speaker] is published. Rudolf Steiner has also published the book *Splošni nauk o človeku kot osnova pedagogike* [The General Doctrine of Man as the Basis of Pedagogy], but the label is no longer active today. Books about Waldorf education in Slovenia are published by various publishers – *Kortina Society*, *Institute for the Development of Waldorf Education*, *Mladinska knjiga*, *DZS (Državna založba Slovenije)*, *Rudolf Steiner publishing*, and *Ajda Publishing House* (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.d).

Waldorf education is also known in Slovenia through organic food and biodynamic agriculture. The *Association for Biodynamic Agriculture (AJDA) Vrzdenc*, founded in 1991, aims to promote biodynamic agriculture and horticulture, animal husbandry, beekeeping, and other work with nature as

1 The *Institute for the Development of Waldorf Schools and Kindergartens*.

developed by anthroposophy.<sup>2</sup> Anthroposophical medicine medicines can be purchased in certain stores, and individual lectures on anthroposophical medicine are organised, but there are no anthroposophical doctors in Slovenia (Vatovec, 2015; Vita Center, n.d.; Apientia, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> The *Eurythmy Association*, founded in 1995, is no longer active. In the last period, the *Workshop for Therapeutic Eurythmy* was organised by the *B Center svoboda gibanja* (B Freedom of Movement Center, n.d.).

## Legislative Frameworks for Waldorf Education

### *Legislative Frameworks*

An overview of the presence of reform education in Slovenia between the two wars shows that no school could be called an alternative in this period, although the reform pedagogical ideas had supporters among the teachers (Protner & Wakounig, 2007). As the first alternative, private school in Slovenia, that was not founded by the Church, the Waldorf primary school began operating in 1992, a year after Slovenia's independence. The founders were parents, teachers, and supporters of Waldorf education who first founded the *Association of Friends of the Waldorf School*, later renamed the *Institute for the Development of Waldorf Schools and Kindergartens in Slovenia* (Protner & Wakounig, 2007).

A few years later, the legal basis for the operation of private schools was created by the *Act on the Organization and Financing of Education* (ZOFVI, 1996; white paper on education,<sup>4</sup> 1995, p. 89). At that time, the state financed 85% of private school programmes, but the Waldorf school in Ljubljana was an exception, which was funded 100% because it had been established

2 They also published the sowing calendar of Marija Thun in Slovenian, founded a publishing house, which limits its literature to those “practical areas of life for which the philosopher and scientist dr. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, stands” (Založba Ajda, 2020). In 1996, they also joined the *Demeter Association* (Biodinamika Društvo za biološko-dinamično gospodarjenje AJDA Vrzdenc, n.d.). They not only supply food to many Waldorf schools and kindergartens but also organise many seminars and training events on the basics of anthroposophical nutrition for humans and animals to promote the recognition and spread of biodynamic agriculture (Demeter, n.d.).

3 There is one doctor in Slovenia, Ana Kaplja Krušič, who is listed in the list of anthropological doctors, but she is also a homoeopathic doctor and is mostly mentioned in that field of healing. The *State Commission for Medical Ethics* (KME) in Slovenia believes that homoeopathy is a medical method that does not have a previous scientific basis and is not scientifically proven and that, therefore, it should not be given a place in public health care in Slovenia. It is now classified in the field of healing. KME advises doctors to give up their homoeopathic licences and mandates doctors, when renewing the medical licence, to sign a declaration that they will not treat with alternative methods (Černoga, 2002).

4 *Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju* (orig.).

before this legislation. In 2020, a change in funding occurred.<sup>5</sup> According to the current legislation, the state provides 100% of the funding for the compulsory programme and 85% for the extended programme for private schools that meet the conditions for public funding (*ibid.*). Although the programme of the Waldorf elementary school in Ljubljana is fully financed from the state budget, the parents still pay tuition per month (€50–170, depending on the social situation of the child’s family), because the state finances do not correspond to the actual costs of the programme. Parents also pay for meals separately, as in public schools (Kordiš, 2019, p. 3).

Waldorf schools and kindergartens operate according to special pedagogical principles and thus represent an alternative to the public school system. The educational programme acquires public validity when a competent professional council determines that it provides the minimum competencies that enable successful completion of education and has been recognised by the competent international association of such schools. The educational programme is then verified by a trial throughout the schooling period of the first generation (ZOFVI, 2022, art. 17). Waldorf schools received public validity in 2003 (Zasebne osnovne šole, 2020). The general aims of the educational system in Slovenia (ZOFVI, 2022, art. 2) are embodied in the educational programme of the Waldorf school, which is pervaded with the spirit of anthroposophy (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.a).

Waldorf education in Slovenia is strongly connected with Steiner’s education and anthroposophy. Waldorf kindergartens and schools operate based on the connection between physical development and spirituality and are founded on the “golden rules of Waldorf education” (Devjak et al., 2008, p. 28). The way of working in Waldorf kindergartens and schools differs from public elementary schools mainly in terms of developmental teaching (Waldorf Pomurje, 2016a).

### *Waldorf Kindergartens*

The first Waldorf kindergarten in Slovenia was founded in 1993; today there are 30. Slovenia has a very well-developed public network of quality

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia* (Ustava Republike Slovenije, 1991), parents in Slovenia have the right to provide their children with a religious and moral education according to their convictions, which must be consistent with the child’s age and maturity and freedom of conscience, religious and other definition or belief (art. 41). According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), parents also have a primary right to choose the manner in which their children are educated (art. 26), and the state must respect the right of parents to provide their children with the type of education that is consistent with their own religious and philosophical beliefs (Protocol no. 2 to the convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, 1963, art. 2). The state makes this possible only by allowing the opening of private schools and kindergartens that operate according to specific pedagogical principles and, consequently, by financing private education.

kindergartens, and the majority of parents seem to want to enrol their children in public kindergarten. We can detect many reasons for that. First, public kindergarten is a bit cheaper than Waldorf, and the curriculum allows the inclusion of elements of alternative educational concepts. Second, Waldorf kindergartens are located mainly in (big) cities, which is remote for many people. Third, Waldorf education seems to be a very closed community, not being discussed in public, which might be the result of public and academia criticism in past years (cf. chapter 4). Fourth, it also appears that, in Slovenia, people still believe that private education is for the elite and thus is elitist.

Life and work in Waldorf kindergartens are based on the central insights of anthroposophy and the education of Emmi Pikler.<sup>6</sup> The programme for children from 1 to 3 years of age includes appropriate “handling,” the exploration and development of movement skills, the principles of loving care, and the atmosphere of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The educators communicate with the child briefly, clearly, and without abstractions, approaching him with kindness and encouragement and looking for positive ways of looking at each situation. Activities are carried out cyclically every three to four weeks. The programme for mixed groups from age 3 until school entry focuses on imitation, rhythm, and repetition. It consists of nursery rhymes, finger plays, fairy tales, artistic activities,<sup>7</sup> puppet shows, free play, outdoor play, and the involvement of children in various practical

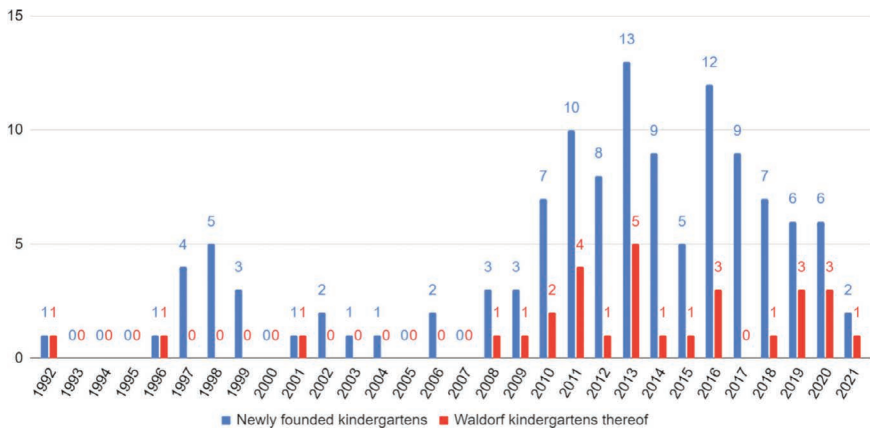


Figure 7.1 Number of all private kindergartens in Slovenia registered in the survey and Waldorf kindergartens thereof (by year of opening). (MIZŠ, 2022.)

6 Emmi Pikler was a paediatrician in Hungary, who wrote and gave lectures about the care and upbringing of infants and young children. She published her first book for parents in 1940. She introduced new theories of infant education and put them in practice in her orphanage (The Pikler collection, n.d.).

7 Artistic activities include drawing with wax crayons, painting with watercolours, using the wet-on-wet technique, designing with beeswax, “painting” with wool, singing, and rhyming games.

activities. The work is cyclical, and the culmination of each season is celebrated with a particular vacation (Waldorf Pomurje, 2016b).

All toys are designed to stimulate imagination and are made by teachers exclusively from natural materials (Waldorf Pomurje, 2016c; Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022a; Sodnik, 2018). The daily routine consists of breakfast, free play and art, tidying up, circle, snack, outdoor play, lunch, rest, snack, and going home (Nicol & Taplin, 2012; Waldorf Pomurje, 2016d; Sodnik, 2018). For lunch, the menus change every two months, but breakfast remains the same regardless of the season (Waldorf Pomurje, 2016e). Cooperation with parents takes place daily, and several times a year, they have parents' evenings, joint work activities, trips, and also a visit to a child's home (Waldorf Pomurje, 2016f).

In Slovenia, Waldorf kindergartens represent an alternative to didactically oriented programs that emphasise academic achievement and neglect the emotional and social development of children, as well as an alternative to cognitively oriented programs. Waldorf kindergarten programs primarily attract parents who reject productivity and competition. Despite the differences, some elements in public kindergartens are similar and can be linked to Waldorf education – unstructured and wooden materials for playing and creating and the emphasis on handwork (Batistič Zorec, 2003).

### *Waldorf Primary Schools*

The first Waldorf school started its operation in 1992, and today there are seven (see table 7.1).

For enrolment, children must meet the requirements according to the *Elementary School Act* (ZOSn, 1996, art. 45, 46), and the parents must be familiarised with the basic features of Waldorf pedagogy, its characteristics, forms, methods of work, educational principles, and approaches. Enrolment also includes mandatory familiarisation with certain literature<sup>8</sup> and a

Table 7.1 Waldorf schools in Slovenia (year of opening). (MIZŠ, 2022.)

<i>Waldorf School Ljubljana</i>	2000
<i>OE Waldorf Kindergarten and Gorenjska School</i>	2012
<i>OE Waldorf Kindergarten and Savinja School</i>	2013
<i>Waldorf School Maribor</i>	2015
<i>OE Waldorf Kindergarten and Primorska School</i>	2016
<i>OE Waldorf Elementary School Pomurje</i>	2020
<i>Kurešček Free School</i> (a private educational institution based on Waldorf education <sup>9</sup> )	2021

8 *Education for Freedom* (Carlgren), *The Impact of Screen Technology on Children* (Sigman). <https://web.archive.org/web/20230727075015/www.svitanje.si/2013/01/vpliv-zaslonske-tehnologije-na-otroke> (memento from 27 July 2023).

9 Kurešček School was opened in 2016 (<https://365.rtvlo.si/arhiv/prvi-dnevnik/174424112>), but as a private school without a concession. However, in 2021 it received the status of a private school with a concession.



possibility of a school visit. School admission also depends on the willingness of the parents to cooperate with the teachers in all matters concerning their child, considering teachers' pedagogical competence. It is of utmost importance that the educational influences are unified, so that they expect parents to participate in all organised activities (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.b). This is not discussed openly, but there is a strong sense that parents who enrol their children in Waldorf school should live according to anthroposophy. However, Lah (2022), a teacher at a Waldorf school in Ljubljana, stated in an online interview that:

Steiner's philosophical outlook includes anthroposophy, which is not a prerequisite for enrolment or teaching at a Waldorf school. Children of parents with quite different worldviews, religions, political views [. . .] are enrolled in a Waldorf school, and a Waldorf school creates a space where all these views can come together and coexist in a constructive dialogue. That is one of its goals.

He says that anthroposophical teaching is not imposed on parents and that parents make decisions about the child's health together with orthodox medicine (Pušnik, 2021). Upon enrolment, an agreement on mutual obligations and cooperation is signed (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.a).

The pedagogical process is based on knowledge and consideration of children's spiritual, mental, and physical development, their connection with the adult world, and the environment in which they live. The subjects are divided into main lessons and those that are taught on a regular weekly basis (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022b). The teacher may also opt out of the programme and devote more time to individual subjects or topics. As a rule, lessons take place with the whole class, but there are some exceptions. Children are also offered extra lessons to prepare for certain competitions (Vega, Kangaroo, History competition, etc.) (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022g; Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.c). As predicted by Steiner, foreign language instruction begins in first grade, with one and a half hours of English and one and a half hours of German taught in the first three grades (Rojko, 1993, pp. 50–51). The emphasis is also on artistic subjects, the flute, eurythmy, needlework, wood carving, and class plays, which are a mandatory part of the lessons (Rojko, 1993, pp. 50–51). The teaching of practical subjects varies slightly from school to school, but all schools have handwork and eurythmy on the schedule (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022b).

Approximately three weeks of activities are distributed among sports, cultural, natural history days and schooling in nature. School holidays are usually coordinated with public schools. Assessment is descriptive at all grade levels and includes the individual circumstances in which a product was created or in which certain knowledge was demonstrated, as well as suggestions for further work. At the completion of each grade, all students normally advance to the next grade. At the end of the school year, they

receive a descriptive report card – with the indication of a negative or positive (excellent, very good, good, or sufficient) evaluation. At the end of each trimester, at least the minimum standards of knowledge necessary for a smooth transition to public elementary school are achieved. In accordance with the *Elementary Education Act* (ZOs, 2006), they must also take the *Nacionalno preverjanje znanja* [National Knowledge Test], like students in public schools (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.a). They also pay special attention to nutrition according to anthroposophical principles. Healthy, organic, and vegetarian food is provided for the children (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.c).

### *Waldorf High School: Gymnasium*

The programme of Waldorf Gymnasium started in the 1999/2000 school year, when the first generation of Waldorf elementary school students graduated. The basic requirement for enrolment is successful completion of elementary school; other requirements are broad interests, activities outside of school, and willingness to engage in new activities and challenges offered (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022c). At the beginning of the school year, students receive the annual schedule for the epochs and their obligations in each subject. Some epochs are led by Waldorf teachers from abroad (classes are taught in English with translation) (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022d). The lessons are mostly phenomenologically oriented. Also offered is a wide range of practical and art subjects. Students also complete internships. In the first year, students spend two weeks doing farm and fieldwork.<sup>10</sup> In the second year, students learn about geodetic measurements. In the third year, students complete an internship in various social institutions (kindergartens, schools, nursing homes, hospitals, etc.) (Zavod za razvoj waldorfskih šol in vrtcev Slovenije – zveza, n.d.b). The grade for an individual subject is influenced not only by performance on written or oral knowledge tests but also by the student's participation and the quality of notes on the subject matter. To receive a passing grade, the student must also fulfil all obligations specified for each subject, including homework, papers, and other work specified by the teacher. Students are also offered an additional year to focus on the general baccalaureate and prepare for its successful completion (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022e).

10 For several years, students visited different organic farms in Slovenia in pairs, but in recent years the internship has been conducted on the school campus, as it was realised that nowadays students find it more difficult to adapt to a new social environment that requires them to be independent and responsible, and they need more guidance and opportunities for quicker feedback and the exchange of opinions.

### *Waldorf Music School*

The *Waldorf Music School* has been operating since 2005. As they write on their website, the advantages and peculiarities of the *Waldorf Music School* are that the teachers have contact with the class teachers and thus can give additional support to the child. They do not conduct entrance tests for musical talent at enrolment, and the lessons take place in the Waldorf elementary school premises. It consists of six years lower school and two years upper school. At the end of the school year, students receive a descriptive report card with the evaluation of their work and guidelines for future activities. The monthly tuition fee in the school year 2021/2022 was: €50 for a trainee, €95 for a basic instrument, and €70 for a second instrument, which is a fee similar to the ones in public music schools in Slovenia (Waldorfska šola Ljubljana, 2022f).

### *Waldorf Teacher Training*

A teacher at a Waldorf school must complete higher education and acquire additional professional skills for teaching according to the principles of Waldorf education and for teaching individual subjects (Waldorfska šola Maribor, n.d.a). The basis of training for a Waldorf teacher is the anthroposophical study of the human being. In order to ensure well-trained personnel, the institute organises regular three-year training for Waldorf teachers based on the following principles:

- The curriculum is closely linked to the developmental needs of the child from infancy to adolescence.
- Teaching is an art that involves the whole personality of the child and the adolescent.
- It is necessary to take care of the development of the abilities and skills of individuals, with the aim that as adults they become conscious, responsible, and compassionate creators of the new future (Zavod za razvoj waldorfskih šol in vrtcev Slovenije – zveza, n.d.c).

The training takes place once or twice a month on weekends. At the end of the school year, there is a one-week intensive training (summer seminar). In addition to lectures and artistic and practical work, they also read specific literary or pedagogical content, perform exercises and performances in front of the study group, and complete internships. The training is completed with a final thesis, which involves an in-depth examination of the chosen topic, supported by practical work. Each completed assignment is an opportunity to develop the individual's musical, craft, artistic, movement, personal, and pedagogical potential. The first year of study is the same for everyone. After that, students are divided into teacher and educator groups. The price for the programme is €1,920 per year (Zavod za razvoj waldorfskih šol in vrtcev Slovenije – zveza, n.d.d).

**Waldorf Education in the Eyes of the Public and Academia**

Medveš<sup>11</sup> (1989, p. 153) wrote in a paper *Waldorfska pedagogika ali kako izgubiti strah in vzljubiti šolo* [Waldorf Education or How to Lose Fear and Love the School] that an objective presentation of Waldorf education is difficult because there are at least three qualitatively different presentations. One is aimed at the general public and is focused on how this school differs from public schools – differences in curricula, organisation of teaching, relationships between teachers and students, encouragement, and assessment. In doing so, they attempt to show how the Waldorf school has succeeded in freeing itself from unhealthy competition and achievement orientation and how it has succeeded in eliminating the fear of school, repetition, assessment, and failure. This completely relegates intellectual goals to the background, making logical thinking, knowledge, and intellectual competition in school irrelevant. On the other hand, the Waldorf school preserves many things that the public school has lost due to the tendency toward intellectualisation. According to Medveš, a child receives a certificate of graduation from a Waldorf school as soon as he or she enrolls. Parents who want to enrol their children and participants of organised events receive a slightly different and improved version of the presentation. Medveš writes that these presentations are charming, pleasant, and full of aesthetic experiences that can override reason. The third presentation, according to Medveš (1989), is intended for future Waldorf teachers and involves the realistic-didactic level and the meditative-mystical level. Zupančič<sup>12</sup> (2004) mentions a fourth one, intended for rare individuals and followers of anthroposophy who have dedicated their lives to the teaching of anthroposophy, which, according to the author, “consists in constant personal and communal reading of Steiner’s public lectures on education and anthroposophy” (Zupančič, 2004, pp. 184–185).

The first news about Waldorf education in Slovenia aroused great interest among the public, especially among those who were looking for a different, more personal way of education (Zupančič, 2004). Most of these records can be found in the Slovenian national newspaper *Delo* and in the Slovenian general information daily *Večer*, where articles present Waldorf education as an alternative approach to learning:

- *Vzgojiteljja se ne igrata, pač pa vzgajata z zgledom: waldorfska pedagogika* [The Educator Does Not Play but Leads by Example. Waldorf Education] (1991)
- *Umetnost waldorfske vzgoje* [The Art of Waldorf Education] (1991)

11 Z. Medveš, was a full time professor at *Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana* between 1980 and 2009, teaching basic pedagogical subjects. He is now an emeritus professor at *University of Ljubljana*.

12 J. Zupančič is the author and co-author of two papers: *Agresivnost med najmlajšimi otroki in sprostitvev preko igre* [Aggression in the Youngest and Relaxation through Play] (2005); *Kako družina kot domača cerkev oblikuje nedeljo: ideal in resničnost* [How the Family as a Domestic Church Shapes Sunday: Ideal and Reality] (2000).

- *Vzgoja za svobodo: pedagogika na prelomu moderne* [Education for Freedom: Education at the Turn of Modernity] (1993)
- *S preprostimi besedami o temeljnih vprašanjih vzgoje: temelj waldorfske pedagogike* [With Simple Words to the Basic Questions of Education: The Foundation of Waldorf Education] (1993)
- *V šoli, ki želi dati nekaj več* [The School That Wants to Give More] (1994)

In trying to learn more about their principles and methods, the media encountered some problems because, as Zupančič (2004, p. 183) writes, Waldorf educators often refuse to give more detailed information about their education, referring to the principle of confidentiality between them and the parents. After 1995, articles began to appear highlighting possible negative aspects of Waldorf education:

- *Štirje razlogi proti waldorfski šoli: waldorfska šola in vzgoja k svobodi* [Four Reasons against Waldorf Schools: Waldorf Schools and Education for Freedom] (1995)
- *So otroci v waldorfskih šolah v vati?, O pedagogikah, ki so osnova za ustanavljanje alternativnih šol, starši ne vedo dovolj* [Are Children in Waldorf Schools Packed in Cotton Wool?, Parents Do Not Know Enough about the Education That Is the Basis for the Establishment of Alternative Schools] (1995)
- *Blišč in beda waldorfske šole* [Sparkles and the Misery of Waldorf Schools] (1995)
- *Otroci grde besede spirajo z vodo in milom: kako pedagoška je waldorfska pedagogika* [Children Wash away Bad Words with Soap and Water: How Pedagogical Waldorf Education Is] (2001).

From 2007, the articles refer mainly to the opening of their new units and their spatial constraints:

- *Ščepec waldorfske pedagogike tudi v Pomurju* [A Pinch of Waldorf Education Also in Pomurje] (2007),
- *Maribor ima nov waldorfski vrtec* [Maribor Has a New Waldorf Kindergarten] (2008),
- *Waldorfska šola jeseni na Cankarju* [Waldorf School in the Fall in Cankarje] (2010),
- *Waldorfska šola prihaja v Pomurje* [The Waldorf School Comes to Pomurje] (2010)
- *V waldorfski vrtec združili dve enoti* [Two Units Were Combined in the Waldorf kindergarten] (2010)
- *Premalo podpore waldorfski pedagogiki: waldorfska vrtca in šola delujejo kot dva samostojna zavoda, plačilo najemnin za občinske prostore se jim zdi neupravičeno* [Insufficient Support for Waldorf Education: Waldorf Kindergarten and School Operate as Two Independent

- Institutions, They Consider the Payment of Rent for Municipal Premises Unjustified] (2011)
- *Waldorfski šoli v Mariboru grozi ukinitev* [Waldorf School in Maribor Is Threatened with Closure] (2015)
  - *Waldorfski šolarji še vedno brez gnezda* [Waldorf School Children Still without a Nest] (2015)
  - *Šola med dvema ulicama* [School between Two Streets] (2015)
  - *Kam z waldorfsko šolo* [Where with a Waldorf school] (2015)
  - *Iz centra mesta na rob industrijske cone: waldorfska pedagogika* [From the City Centre to the Edge of the Industrial Area: Waldorf Education] (2015)
  - *Waldorfska šola se le seli* [The Waldorf School Is only Moving] (2016)
  - *Vrtec Studenček začasno v bližnji šoli* [The Studenček Kindergarten Is Temporarily Housed in a Nearby School] (2019)
  - *Na urgentno sanacijo čakajo že dve leti: waldorfski vrtec Studenček* [For two years they have been waiting for urgent renovation: the Studenček Waldorf kindergarten] (2021)
  - *Waldorfska šola ponovno na dražbo* [The Waldorf School Is Up for Auction Again] (2022)

During the Covid-19 epidemic, Waldorf kindergartens and schools were more frequently mentioned in newspapers. In 2021, the School Inspectorate closed two Waldorf schools, according to STA (STA & M.K., 2021) for non-compliance with anti-covid measures. They did not organise the required self-tests for children, obtain the appropriate consents from parents, and did not properly organise distance education for children who did not have consent (Vrečar, 2021). As the director of the Waldorf school *Ljubljana*, Kordiš, explained, “students were not turned away without their parents’ consent because their way of working is based on consultation, discussion and cooperation.” In his opinion, the measures were excessive and disproportionate, and the deadlines were too short (STA, 2021). The closure of the schools provoked various reactions, some favourable in the sense that there is no reason to close schools, others more directed against private schools or criticism of Waldorf education.

Waldorf education in Slovenia still operates in more or less closed circles within its institutions and social network. Training courses, seminars, workshops, events, and open days are mostly published on their websites and are therefore aimed primarily at supporters of Waldorf education and the associated way of life. Experts in the field of education (the last article on Waldorf education in Slovenia was published in 2018) usually point out the relationship between the intellectualism of the public school and the artistic approach of the Waldorf education for freedom and its didactic paradigms. They criticise the theory of personality development, which, according to Zupančič (2004), is typical of 19th century developmental psychology and is thus outdated and unscientific. In the author’s opinion, the only important thing in Waldorf education is “that the child follows anthroposophical

thought, since this is the only ‘science’ that Steiner recognizes” (Zupančič, 2004, p. 187). She goes even further and warns:

to entrust a child to the principles of Waldorf education is therefore to expose it to the risk that its perception of the world will be shaped in such a way that it will no longer be able to distinguish clearly between reality and dreams.

(Zupančič, 2004, p. 187)

She also criticises one of the basic principles of Waldorf education – age-appropriate education – because it is not possible to draw a clear parallel between the physical and psychological development of a child. Divjak<sup>13</sup> (1995, p. 43) wrote that such an assessment of a child’s development is arbitrary because, for example, the shape and growth of teeth are connected with a system of cosmic, historical forces, with karma, and with a child’s mental characteristics and abilities. ”The observation of the child takes place under the influence of the impressions and wishes of the anthroposophical observer. Through their observation they confirm what they already think about the child and are therefore immune to criticism.”

Kroflič<sup>14</sup> (1992, p. 116) also emphasised that “the limitation of rational justification of (necessary) prohibitions and the construction of the educational environment hidden from the child at the same time dangerously opens the door for possible manipulation and indoctrination in education.” Even one of the basic positive arguments of Waldorf education – the non-committal, anti-intellectualistic attitude – is questioned because by letting the child do as much as she pleases, there is a danger that the child will learn little and will not acquire learning habits. Zupančič (2004) also criticises the spiritual dimension of Waldorf education and writes that parents must believe “that the Waldorf School teaching method is correct, and they trust the teacher completely” (Zupančič, 2004, p. 191). Despite its often controversial theoretical background, the Waldorf school has great educational appeal. This is a guarantee not of greater educational success but of parents’ desire to cooperate more with the school, and they want their children to receive more experience, consideration for individuality, humanity, and pedagogical sensitivity (Strmčnik, 2003, p. 91).

They have many more subjects on the schedule than a classical elementary school, they develop both hemispheres of the brain: they have all

13 M. Divjak, MSc, is a sociologist and, now retired, a researcher.

14 R. Kroflič is a full professor in the fields of general pedagogy and educational theory at the *Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana*. For his achievements he received a great recognition from the *Faculty of Arts* (2007) and the *State Award* for outstanding achievements in the field of higher education (2011).



subjects such as painting, molding, handicrafts, eurythmy, flute [. . .] and many others. The main subjects, like mathematics, Slovene [. . .] they have lessons by epochs, that is, they learn one (main) subject for a few weeks, then another subject for a few weeks [. . .]. In addition to the main subject they also have other subjects mentioned above for one day.

(Ringaraja.net, 2005)

In a Waldorf school, the child's talents and the development of stronger areas are emphasised. Even more, they are encouraged, they have to think more, and they have to be more independent. But they are also given enough time to do that. So they can use all their ingenuity, imagination, and creativity. In public schools, children are molded. They have to do exactly what, exactly when, and exactly how, and if they cannot do that, they get a bad grade. (Med.over.net, 2012).

However, there are also negative comments about the foundations. Anthroposophy is also problematised by Kroflič (U.Č., 2003). As he points out, anthroposophy should give Waldorf educators:

a complete insight into the soul-spiritual structure of the human being and the principles of development. Subject knowledge is not the most important in elementary school. Of course, many Waldorf teachers went through the pedagogical training [. . .] but of course not in all main school subjects, which in a Waldorf elementary school, are all fully taught by a single teacher.

Among the negative comments it is mentioned that Waldorf education rejects or does not allow the use of ICT. This is also problematised by Kroflič (U.Č., 2003):

[S]tudents in this school receive all information from the class teacher, children are not advised to pursue information through other media, the school's contact with the family is very close, in short, there are not many opportunities for a child to receive other views on life issues. The next danger is the inhibition of rational development until the age of 14 – until then the child should learn by imitation and by suggestive images. This principle is welcome for the field of art, but not for other school subjects, not even for education.

In the forums, many people also problematise anthroposophical teachings: "Children are supposed to have some relaxation, meditation before classes [. . .] but this was presented to the public as prayer" (Ringaraja.net, 2005). Commenting on religion, nutrition, influence on home lifestyle, interference in the family sphere, the connection with parents and family being the basis of Waldorf education: "If the teachers and the school leaders consider that the parents violate the

code they have signed, they can reject the child or forbid him to attend kindergarten” (Ringaraja.net, 2005).

Many comments point out that enrolment in a Waldorf school is “a decision made by the parents who decide why their child should attend this school.” With the aim of familiarising parents with the Waldorf pedagogy, they organise playtimes, open days, various fairs, etc., which is certainly positive in terms of familiarising them with their work. However, Kroflič (U.Č., 2003) problematises that the Waldorf school “has open days [. . .] but does not approve any classroom visits because it would supposedly disturb the students excessively.” There is no actual insight into the school life, and, when enrolling a child in a kindergarten or school that stands on certain pedagogical principles, it is important for parents to become acquainted with the concept itself. In addition, it is often written in the forums: “parents can visit this school, see the classes, and decide whether to enrol their child in this school based on what they have seen.,” “People do not have enough knowledge, they often have the wrong opinion because they are not familiar enough” (Lunin.net, 2004). “I like the concept, but you cannot keep kids in a bubble. It lets them down in the face of the real world. I would use this school for recreational activities” (Kulinarika.net, 2017).

Even Kroflič (U.Č., 2003) states in the online chat room that the Waldorf school:

is not a school for those who want to provide their children with a quality academic education. I consider the pedagogical concept of Waldorf education dangerous because it allows dangerous abuses due to the power attributed to the teacher and the restriction to a circle of like-minded people.

It appears from many posts that horizontal comparisons are made between education in Waldorf and public schools, which is a problem. “The children are completely confused when they get to secondary school” (Kulinarika.net, 2017). “The work in these schools is very slow” (Med.over.net, 2012).

As Kroflič points out (U.Č., 2003):

[F]rom the beginning there was practically no connection between ‘scientific education’, which is supposed to be the basis for the work in public schools, and Waldorf education. Steiner’s theory of development and his anthropological conceptions of the human being are completely different from the development of anthropology, psychology, and education within the framework of the universities.

As can be seen from the posts in the forums, parents are concerned that children in Waldorf schools are not acquiring the appropriate standards of knowledge. “Waldorf high school students score very poorly on their final exams” (Kulinarika.net, 2017). “I myself would never enrol a child who has

no special learning difficulties in a Waldorf school. I would recommend it to all parents who have naturally bright children but are not familiar with the classical teaching of learning” (Kulinarika.net, 2017).

Kroflič (1992) summarises his thoughts on Waldorf education by noting that Waldorf education cannot legitimately aspire to penetrate the broader school field; until it reconsiders and resolves its theoretical assumptions, it will remain, within the current framework, only a marginal presence within alternative educational approaches. As he further writes, Steiner’s concept of education fell into the same paradox as the Enlightenment. Namely, the insolubility of the question of how to mediate freedom in the face of coercion, control, restriction, and imitation. “By emphasizing the limitation of rational justification of (necessary) prohibitions and the construction of the educational environment hidden from the child, he dangerously opens the door to possible manipulation and indoctrination in education” (Kroflič, 1992, p. 116). “Steiner, like the Enlightenment, sought to endow the educator with the necessary authority, while the educator could use all the methods of the Enlightenment. In his concept, Steiner eliminated the dangers described by carefully selecting both the educators, students and parents.”

## **Conclusion**

In Slovenia, Waldorf education is an alternative to the public school system, an alternative for people who live in the spirit of anthroposophy or for those who accept such a view of life. Although students studying education are introduced to the concept of Waldorf education, training to become a Waldorf teacher takes place outside the public, formal system of educator training. The biggest difference between Waldorf education and the public education concept lies in the way of teaching, in the approach to the child’s development, and in the role of the educator. Despite the differences, certain elements, such as descriptive assessment, corners in kindergarten, the use of unstructured material, have been adopted in the public school system. Academics and, more recently, the general public view Waldorf education quite critically emphasises the relationship between the intellectualism of the public school and the artistic approach of the Waldorf school, focusing on the discussion of the Waldorf school as a school that educates for freedom, given its didactic paradigms. Waldorf education in Slovenia mostly moves in closed circles within its institutions and social network; it is not connected with the public education system, and therefore academics do not often write about it. There are professional articles written by Waldorf teachers and educators, and there are quite a few discussions in online forums, which are mainly about sharing experiences. Books dealing with Waldorf education serve to familiarise readers with the education itself, the view of the child, and the way of working. All books published or translated in our country are from Steiner’s Waldorf education, since Waldorf education in Slovenia is completely connected

with anthroposophy and with Steiner as its founder. Waldorf education is most recognisable in the country's kindergartens and schools, somewhat less so in the area of nutrition and anthroposophical medicine. As Kroflič writes, Waldorf education should rethink and dissolve certain theoretical assumptions in order to penetrate the broader school sector in the Slovenian space.

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# 8 Waldorf Education

## Lighthouse for Forgotten Chinese Pedagogical Wisdom

*Yifan Sun*

### Introduction

China's mainstream education system stresses early and intense academic development, regimentation, competition, and standardised testing (Gu, 2010). Moreover, the pedagogy has been criticised across Chinese society because it mainly relies on a teacher-centred approach, memorisation, and cramming (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In recent years, however, Chinese parents have been seeking alternatives, and the alternative education movement, for example, the Waldorf and Montessori models, and homeschooling, have spread rapidly (Johnson, 2014; Kellum, 2013).

In late 2019, I completed a doctoral thesis at the *University of Cambridge* on the Chinese “Steiner Fever,” which refers to the rapid growth of Steiner (Waldorf) education in China. The first Waldorf school in China was opened in 2004 in Chengdu, the capital of the southwestern Sichuan province (Fussell, 2014). It is estimated that more than 400 kindergartens and 77 Waldorf schools have been founded since 2005 in China (Shanhaiyuan, 2019), and there was a significant expansion of Waldorf (Steiner) education before 2019 (“China’s Yuppies,” 2017; James, 2014; Johnson, 2014). Many schools have reached capacity, and many families are still queuing to get in (e.g. there is an approximately five-year waiting list for the Chengdu Waldorf school); some parents are even starting their own schools (Nylander, 2014).

However, according to a recent conversation I had with an influential figure in the Waldorf education movement, who is also a Waldorf school founder, since 2019, the Waldorf movement in China has “cooled down,” and some schools have even closed down. Based on his comments, two reasons can be identified: (1) the tightened educational policy in China on the private education sector, stricter rules on teachers’ teaching qualifications, and more vigorous enforcement of the core Chinese curriculum in recent years; (2) various disappointments of parents who have sent their children to a Waldorf school, such as teaching quality, educational outcome, and prospects of their children after graduation. The disappointments are in line with what I found out regarding parents’ dilemmas and disillusionions in their experience with Waldorf schools in my doctoral thesis, which I present and discuss

later. According to another school founder I talked to early in 2023, the impact of Covid-19 on the Chinese Waldorf kindergartens was huge: many parents opted out of the Waldorf kindergartens and educated their children at home after periods of lockdown. Several training centres around China, which used to organise Waldorf-related training or workshops, have also been affected and stagnated.

### Discussion of Methodological Approach

This chapter draws on data from my ethnographic fieldwork from December 2016 to September 2017 at Waldorf school communities in China. Most data was collected at two Waldorf schools in China: the Beijing school and the Chengdu school. The Beijing school is located in a rural village on the outskirts of Beijing, China's capital city. The Chengdu school is situated in an urban area of Chengdu, a major city in Western China. Both schools are relatively established and mature among Waldorf schools in China. I conducted four months of fieldwork at each research site. I also visited several Waldorf schools across China and worked as a translator at the *Asian Waldorf Teachers' Conference* 2017, where I met and interviewed some key figures in the Waldorf education movement in China. Additionally, I gathered information, including books and magazines on Waldorf education, school newsletters and newspapers, and information available on school websites and social media platforms.

In total, I conducted a total of 55 one-to-one semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> at the two Waldorf school communities with school founders, teachers (or members of school staff), parents, parent-teachers, former teachers, former parents, and school mentors from Europe and New Zealand. The snowball method was used for sampling. These interviews were conducted in homes, staff meeting rooms at school, and sometimes conference meeting rooms after a conference. The duration of the interviews was kept flexible and adapted to different situations in the field, with an average duration of 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed. I used the software NVivo for data management and analysis, and the Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was followed when conducting thematic analysis.

1 The structure of the interview schedule is as follows: (1) demographics; (2) previous educational (and professional/life) experience; (3) decision to opt for Steiner education (personal, and/or for children); (4) experience with Steiner education; (5) views and beliefs on education; (6) views on and understanding of Steiner education; (7) other people who are involved and the so-called Steiner Fever; (8) others and closing. Some of the leading questions include but are not limited to: "Why did you choose to get involved with Steiner education (as a parent/staff)?", "What is your experience of Steiner education so far?", "Has your child attended other schools/kindergartens before coming to Steiner education, and what was that experience like? Any changes after coming to Steiner education?", "What is your understanding of Steiner education?", etc.

The final part of the data is from my conversations in early 2023 with two central figures in the Waldorf movement in China, who also founded several Waldorf schools. I conducted informal interviews with them online to have a more up-to-date overview of the Waldorf movement in China.<sup>2</sup>

## Historical, Social, Cultural, and Educational Contexts in China

### *Chinese Traditional Cultures and Values*

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism constitute the essence of traditional Chinese culture; the relationship between the three has been marked by both contention and complementation in history. These three cultural expressions are summed up by Koller (2012) as three ways of attaining the self-transformation and perfection of human beings: the Taoist way, which involves following the Inner Way (Tao) of Nature; the Confucian way, which requires the cultivation of human nature and the social virtues; and the Buddhist way, which takes place through gaining meditative insight into the mind.

The three ancient practices have each played a foundational role in the development of Chinese culture, with varying degrees of influence and significance during different dynasties. As Nisbett has noted:

The Chinese orientation towards life was shaped by the blending of three different philosophies: Taoism, Confucianism, and, much later, Buddhism. Each philosophy emphasised harmony and largely discouraged abstract speculation. [. . .] The principle of yin-yang is the expression of the relationship that exists between opposing but interpenetrating forces that may complete one another, make each comprehensible, or create the conditions for altering one into the other.

(Nisbett, 2003, p. 13)

The tree of Chinese cultural life appears to have been planted in particularly rich and fertile philosophical and theological soil, which has experienced some erosion in recent times. The cultural shocks precipitated by the Chinese modernisation process, of which Maoism can be viewed as a part, significantly threatened much of what, until that point, had been so deeply embedded within Chinese culture as to be taken for granted. Chan (1963) eloquently notes the importance of Taoism in everyday life: “No one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art medicine – or even cooking without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book [of *Tao Te Ching*]” (Chan, 1963, p. 136).

2 Ethical considerations were employed in conformity with the guidelines laid out by the *British Educational Research Association* during the research (BERA, 2011). This was undertaken with special consideration of the cultural specificity of the Chinese context. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

At this point, it is vital to acknowledge the spiritual aspect of Waldorf education and traditional Chinese values emanating from Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Waldorf education understands human beings as spiritual entities. To state the notion of spirituality in the most basic manner, I can say that there remains something unknowable (in the conventional sense) yet significant about the animating force of human consciousness. In keeping with ideas found in anthroposophy, Waldorf education essentially promotes the idea that the universal or spiritual element to existence (whilst unknowable within the limited paradigm of reason) is accessible or “feel-able” if human beings can develop their full range of faculties through education. Thus Waldorf education is an implicitly spiritual quest. This notion of spiritual quest shares similarities with the Chinese Tao (道; a perfectly untranslatable term), which cannot be “known” as an abstract thought but may be said to be felt. I found this definition of Taoism particularly fruitful: “[Taoism] refers to the way the universe hangs together in an ordered non-casual fashion, and, in response to that, the way in which humans should conduct themselves” (Pattison, 2000, p. 203).

#### *Historical Contextualisation: The Modernisation Process*

The modernisation process can be understood as a concerted effort by the ruling powers within China to provide technological, economic, and social reform generally aimed at bringing China’s development in line with the progress that was considered to have taken place in the West. The start of China’s modernisation process, I want to suggest, effectively begins with China’s defeat to Great Britain in the Second Opium War in 1860 (Schoppa, 2011). Western technology emanating out of a blossoming capitalist economy served to recast China’s largely rural peasant community as backward and underdeveloped. The *Self-Strengthening Movement* followed, and in the early 20th century, China prepared for a global knowledge-based and information-based economy (Palm, 2012; Li, 2016). During the Maoist era (1949–1976), Chairman Mao pursued a modernisation agenda, emphasising self-reliance and rejecting foreign involvement and capitalism (Schoppa, 2011). The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) further challenged traditional values, viewing aspects like Confucianism as obstacles to modernisation (Žižek, 2011).

What is clear is that China looked towards the West in its quest to modernise and, in doing so, underwent some of the sociocultural changes that are indicative of modernity as laid out Foucault (1977), such as the rejection of tradition, the prioritisation of individualism, faith in scientific and technological progress, rationalisation and professionalisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, and secularisation. Foucault, of course, refers to Western modernity; the Chinese context is somewhat more challenging to categorise due to its lack of representative democracy and, indeed, the economic and social policies of the Chinese government, “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Deng, 1982).

The speed with which Mao attempted to eradicate 2,500 years of theological and philosophical life in China has arguably left China somewhat morally and spiritually disconnected from its past (Yan, 2011). What remains unclear, however, is which aspects of Chinese spiritual and cultural life have survived the Maoist era in their unshakeability.

### *Political and Social Contextualisation*

The political and social contexts of education in contemporary China are rather unique. In the process of more than 30 years of political and economic reforms, the *Chinese Communist Party* (CCP) has incorporated a capitalist economy with a socialist authoritarian form of governance, which, according to the anthropologist Pieke (2009), can be best understood as a kind of “neo-socialism.”

Since the implementation of market-oriented reforms in 1978, Chinese society has transitioned from a planned and centrally controlled economy to a market economy (Bian, 2002). This transition has taken place over the past three decades and has involved radical changes in China’s economy and social structure (Lu, 2001).

The middle class in contemporary China does not conform to the typical image of their middle-class counterparts in the highly stratified societies of the West in terms of, for example, a stable lifestyle, mainstream values, and active political participation (Wright, 1997). Instead, contemporary China’s social structure is fluid and unstable, with a high degree of social mobility (Bian, 2002). Guo (2002) and Yang (2003) found that education could be a critical factor in social mobility, particularly in this transitional Chinese society. The variation in educational attainment is strongly associated with an individual’s social status (Li, 2005). Thus families attempt to facilitate their children’s success at school by providing them with cultural capital (Sheng, 2014).

### *Education System and Educational Reforms in China*

Since the Opening-Up policy to modernise China in the late 1970s, education has undergone a great transformation. Aligned with the development of the market-oriented economy and its increasing integration with the global market, a more pragmatic view of education has gradually taken shape in the post-Mao era. This has resulted in the decentralisation and marketisation of education (Ngok, 2007), and private schools have resurfaced (Mok et al., 2009).

A key feature associated with the current education system in China is the *National College Entrance Examinations*, commonly known as the *Gaokao* among Chinese people. Admissions to undergraduate programmes are based on students’ *Gaokao* scores. A few exceptional cases are considered without the examination results. Since a college degree is required for virtually all government positions and accords social status, the *Gaokao* is perceived as determining the course of a student’s life (Zhao, 2012). Since its establishment,

the Gaokao has primarily directed the nation's education. The school has become the training ground for the examination system, and learning has become a simple, monotonous practice session to enable students to answer test questions at both primary and secondary education levels (Gu, 2010). As a result, students lose interest in and curiosity about exploring anything beyond the set curriculum (Niu & Sternberg, 2003).

Since the early 1980s, alongside rapid economic growth and comprehensive social transformation, China's education system has undergone continuous reform (OECD, 2016). However, many Chinese people, including teachers and parents, are frustrated with and disillusioned by the fate of educational reforms, such as those designed to promote *suzhi jiaoyu* [quality education] or *jianfu* [reduce the burden] of homework on students. Many teachers argue that when a rigid examination system is the major driving factor, reforms are destined to fail (Hansen, 2015).

### Glimpse Into the Waldorf Movement in China

From kindergarten to high school, both schools that I researched are reasonably well-established and relatively mature compared to other Waldorf schools in China. Both schools comprise kindergartens (including parent-toddler classes for ages 1.5–3 that run two days each week, several mixed-age kindergartens for ages 3–6 that run five days a week), and a lower school (grades 1–8, ages 7–14), and an upper school (grades 9–12, ages 15–18). Both schools have more than 400 students (from kindergarten to year 12 in the upper school). These student numbers are roughly similar with what is found in urban state schools.

The two Waldorf schools have relatively high fees: both charge around CNY40,000 (roughly €5,000) in tuition fees per year.<sup>3</sup> They do not offer regular scholarships for students but occasionally grant some discounts on tuition fees to a few students with low family income or financial difficulties. The schools have their reasons for the costs. A manager of one of the schools explained that Waldorf schools received no funding from the government or NGOs, and they tried, as far as possible, to use organic, natural materials, and they also provided daily healthy organic lunches and often organised outings.

3 The fees for private schools in China vary significantly depending on the school's location, reputation, facilities, and educational level (e.g. primary, secondary, or higher education). On average, private school tuition fees in China can range from a few thousand to tens of thousands of Chinese yuan per year. High-end international or prestigious private schools may have considerably higher fees compared to local private schools. The average income in China varies by region and occupation. Nationally, as of September 2021, the average annual income per capita was around CNY40,660 or roughly €5,040. However, income levels can significantly differ between urban and rural areas, as well as among various industries and professions. The approximate range for the annual income of the middle class in urban areas could be between CNY60,000 to CNY200,000 Chinese yuan, which is about €7,440 to €24,800. These figures are approximations and may vary depending on the specific study or source.

The efforts of many years of “pushing the government to accept alternative education in China” were not in vain (Huang, 2011, p. 1). In January 2012, the Chengdu Waldorf school obtained an official licence from the *Chinese Department of Education*, covering the kindergartens and lower/primary school but not the upper/secondary school. Prior to this, like many other Waldorf schools in China, the Chengdu Waldorf school operated in a “yellow-light” zone, neither fully approved nor shut down by the government but under close observation and assessment (Huang, 2011). Many Waldorf kindergartens and schools continue to operate without a licence, adding to the unique complexity of the Steiner education movement in China.

For instance, the Beijing Waldorf school remained in this “yellow-light” zone during my fieldwork in 2017 and received the “green light” in 2019. On the other hand, the Chengdu school faced a “red light” for its upper school section and ceased operations in 2011.

Some families appeared unconcerned by the lack of a licence, whilst others worried about the later years of their children’s schooling, as they were not sure that academic credentials would be recognised outside the Waldorf education system. I will elaborate more on parental experiences and dilemmas in a later section.

### *Parents, Teachers, and School Communities*

The founding of most Waldorf schools in China was driven by what is widely referred to among the Waldorf communities in China as “the grass-roots mothers’ self-help movement.” Many Waldorf parents go on later to become teachers at the Waldorf school to which they have sent their children. Teachers at the schools in which I conducted my fieldwork often played a dual role: most of them were both teachers and parents. Their children were studying at the same school that they were working at. Parents becoming teachers is rarely seen in China’s state education system or international schools. This, interestingly, presents a unique picture of the Waldorf movement in China.

An analysis of the interview sample from the two Waldorf schools indicates that most participants were from the “middle class” in China. Though the middle class is by no means a clearly recognised entity in China, I place these parents in this category based on their professions, educational background, and powers of consumption. Most of the parents I knew lived in double-income households, and all devoted enormous amounts of their time and energy to their child’s education; some of them had or were expecting a second child since the One-Child Policy was relaxed in 2013. Many parents and families travelled for leisure; some owned private cars and had at least one home somewhere else in the country, although they might be renting the one in which they lived in the school neighbourhood. It could be suggested that many parents came to Waldorf education after they had already attained a degree of success and achievement within their career, which allowed them in turn to benefit from freedoms that financial comfort provides.



It is important to discuss the relatively exclusive status of Waldorf education in China, as most working-class families in China would find the cost of Waldorf education prohibitive. The relative cost has prompted headlines such as the one found in the *Economist* concerning Waldorf education, which reads, *China's yuppies want schools to be more laid-back* (2017). The fees for entering one of the Waldorf schools were high, and class diversity was not prevalent in the two Waldorf schools. Evidently, becoming a Waldorf parent was an achievement that hinged upon relatively high levels of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). To some extent, in sending their children to Waldorf education, these parents, in a sense, were producing new forms of social differentiation and hierarchy (see Rocca, 2015).

The two Waldorf schools attracted families (parents and students) and teachers from this vast country. The fact that the majority of the families were not from the local area meant the school community was extraordinarily diverse. People came from different religious backgrounds (such as practising Buddhists and Taoists), while many practiced no specific religion but identified as spiritual. Generally, Waldorf parents were educated to the graduate level, although some did not have a college degree. The occupational make-up of the parents revealed a greater degree of similarity and overlap. For example, the interviewed parents' various occupations tended towards white-collar employment in private companies, low- and mid-ranking civil servants, self-employed business operators, full-time mothers, and engineers. Most parents were born between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s and were Han Chinese. Most Waldorf pupils came from traditional nuclear families; however, there were a few single parents. What united Waldorf parents was their incredible efforts to migrate, often having given up their homes and jobs, to send their child to this Waldorf school.

The staff at the two Waldorf schools comprised class teachers, subject teachers, and other staff, including administrative, logistics, and management staff. Only a few teachers had work experience in state schools; some had previously worked in other Waldorf schools. Before working in these two Waldorf schools, the occupational background of the teaching staff had been diverse: they included university graduates, businesspeople, corporate professionals, and homemakers. Most teachers had no teaching qualifications – neither state teaching nor Waldorf teacher training qualifications. For Waldorf schools, it is difficult to compete with the state schools regarding salaries and benefits when recruiting staff.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many Waldorf schools, including the Beijing Waldorf school, are located in remote and unfavourable areas. Still, most staff at the two schools appeared content and passionate

<sup>4</sup> In major cities of China, the average salary for a Waldorf teacher could range from approximately CNY5,000–10,000 Chinese yuan per month, which is roughly €620.00–1,240.00.

about working in their school, although the staff turnover rate did not seem particularly low to me during my fieldwork.

Gradually a community of parents and staff developed around both schools. Based on my observation, some of these people have slowly integrated themselves into a new lifestyle: visiting farmers' markets, eating and promoting the cultivation of organic food, purchasing natural and handmade crafts, such as beeswax crayons, some had even started their own organic farms. These families tended to wear clothes made of natural materials and with some traditional Chinese elements. They also often talked about visiting nature reserves in the country and Waldorf schools in Western countries. In keeping with the principles of Waldorf education, parents kept their children, especially those under 12 years old, away from televisions and other electronic devices. They encouraged them to play outdoors in the bamboo woods or the fields. The schools also advised families to eat dinner together at home, and some families enjoyed having other families over for a meal to cultivate bonds in the Waldorf community.

On a larger scale, the Steiner movement in China is still considerably young. There are a few biodynamic farms around China, such as in Beijing and Guangdong, and most are small in size and still need help to survive. Occasionally, some classes at a Waldorf school would organise trips to the biodynamic farms to participate in farming and communal activities. There have not been many qualified anthroposophical medical doctors or well-established anthroposophical or Camphill communities. As a result, the interrelations between Waldorf education and the other anthroposophical fields of practice, medicine, and agriculture have yet to be established.

### *How Are Waldorf Education Principles Practiced in Waldorf Schools in China?*

Judging from my time with them, Waldorf education practitioners in China (including Waldorf school founders and teachers) had a genuine interest in practising what the principles of Waldorf education entail. A great effort was made to invite anthroposophical scholars and senior Waldorf teachers from all over the world – the United States, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK in particular – to mentor and offer courses and workshops at the Chinese Waldorf schools.

Since 2002, a series of books by Steiner have been translated into Mandarin. Teachers at the two Waldorf schools in this study formed weekly reading groups to study the books of Rudolf Steiner or those related to anthroposophy. On many occasions, the parents of Waldorf pupils were also invited to participate in these reading groups. Yet Waldorf teachers in China would not necessarily consider themselves anthroposophists and would rarely refer to themselves as such. There was a feeling amongst teachers that the label of “anthroposophist” felt too prescriptive and dogmatic. At times, teachers

commented that, despite taking a genuine interest in anthroposophy, they found some of the academic writing styles challenging to grasp.

The Waldorf movement in China has developed so rapidly since 2004 that there is some difficulty recruiting and training enough qualified teachers. This has undoubtedly been a factor that requires acknowledgement as it affects the schools' ability to implement Waldorf practices in a manner they consider ideal. Often when a new Waldorf school is established in China, it is run with a shortage of fully qualified staff. As a result, the school has to make do with employing teachers who lack experience and specific Waldorf teaching skills. It should be noted that even though these teachers are less experienced, they have a genuine interest in Waldorf education and have often received partial or complete Waldorf teacher training as they have gone along with their teaching at the Waldorf school.

There are cases when specific Waldorf schools, in their quest to gain the official licence, can be understood to have accepted a degree of compromise concerning the content of their teaching. These compromises often mean the incorporation of aspects of the state curriculum, which interferes with the Waldorf curriculum that is taught. In such cases, the changing of teaching practices and specific oriented content is less ideological; rather, it pertains to pragmatism on the schools' part in their desire to help facilitate their future. This is yet another aspect of Waldorf education in China that adds to its complex nature.

### *Creating Educational Practices Appropriate for China*

The Chinese Waldorf schools have adopted Waldorf educational practices and implemented them in various ways. Part of this process requires the Chinese Waldorf schools to find their own cultural identities within their teaching content (Cherry, 2014). How Waldorf education is implemented in China is a topic often discussed and reviewed in meetings and conferences among Chinese Waldorf education practitioners (see Hu, 2017). The Chinese Waldorf schools seek to design an international yet essentially Chinese education. For example, one question that has often been raised is how can teachers in China substitute European histories, songs, fairy tales, and children's rhymes with appropriate local counterparts relevant to the Chinese people?

Ben Cherry, one of the key individuals in establishing the Chinese Waldorf movement, spoke about the efforts that Chinese teachers were making:

Much has been achieved, for example, by a grass-roots approach to creating curriculum appropriate for China. Research seminars take place in different regions focusing on different aspects of teaching. Each seminar is led by a group of more experienced Chinese teachers and all teachers from the region are invited. This collaboration is then continued in meetings organised by the teachers themselves.

(Cherry, 2014, p. 19)

Traditional Chinese practices have become incorporated into Waldorf education in China. During my ten-month fieldwork, various courses and

workshops were going on in Waldorf schools throughout the year, including anthroposophical medicine, I Ching, Goethean sciences, anthroposophical drama, traditional Chinese painting, traditional Chinese massage for children, anthroposophical rhythmic massage, etc. All of these different practices appeared to be combined in a complementary manner. At the *Asian Waldorf Teachers' Conference* that I attended in 2017, 54 workshops were offered, of which the majority were related to Waldorf education or anthroposophy, and some were related to traditional Chinese practices, including traditional Chinese painting and philosophies.

### *Flexibility of Interpretation in Waldorf Schools*

Most Waldorf schools in China have adopted a more flexible approach to interpreting anthroposophy. Often the Waldorf schools I visited in China felt traditionally Chinese, even more so, according to my experience, than Chinese state schools. At times I encountered portraits of Confucius and images of the Taoist Yin/Yang symbol in the Waldorf classrooms. I also observed traditional practices, such as classic calligraphy and the traditional art of Chinese paper cutting (*jianzhi*) being taught at Waldorf schools. Certain Chinese Waldorf schools appear to have adopted a more orthodox approach. In many respects, the classroom interiors and teaching methods would be hard to tell apart from the European Waldorf schools, so closely have they followed the settings of European schools. Following my observations and conversations, however, I was led to understand that these more orthodox schools in China should be considered the exception.

From speaking to Waldorf practitioners and attending conferences, I could see that many of the Waldorf schools around China incorporated a lot of Chinese values and practices into their educational practice. Instead of Waldorf watercolour painting, some schools practiced traditional Chinese painting. Some of the teachers and parents I interviewed felt that even if the specificities of the teaching content differ between Chinese practices and Waldorf teachings, their essence remains aligned. Of course, some Waldorf educators in China may suggest that integrating traditional Chinese aspects into Waldorf education is not in keeping with the original teachings.

At this stage, it is sufficient to say that the question of how strictly Waldorf practices should be followed remains a moot point. Of course, any form of teaching is subject to differing interpretations, which may lead to very differing practices. If we consider Steiner's teachings as a form of interpretation themselves, which seeks to understand the human spirit, then it appears to me that both a more orthodox approach, which seeks to maintain and conserve Waldorf principles, and a flexible approach, which seeks new interpretations, should be parts of the broader conversation within the Chinese context.

The specific situation of Waldorf education seeking a relevant articulation in the Chinese context can be considered a valuable opportunity in which Waldorf practitioners can re-familiarise and re-evaluate different interpretations of Waldorf practices. It offers a unique context from which to discuss and debate the importance of what lies behind the teachings in the first place.

That is to say, the conversation surrounding the interpretation of the essence of Steiner's educational values and how this can be translated into specific content so that it remains culturally and socially relevant to the Chinese context can be considered an essential aspect of what it means to keep the essence of Waldorf education alive.

### *"Temporal Dimension" of the Waldorf Movement in China*

In the Chinese Waldorf education movement, according to one influential figure in the Chinese Waldorf education movement, whom I talked to in early 2023, the temporal dimension can be categorised into three stages. The initial stage, which he termed the "Waldorf fundamentalist stage," spanned from 2004 (when the first Waldorf school was founded in China) until 2012 or 2013. During this period, the curriculum closely mirrored Western countries like the United States, Germany, the UK, and Australia. Foreign Waldorf teachers were regarded as authoritative experts, and Steiner's works were treated as the guiding principles. The organisational and management aspects were relatively disordered.

The second stage is from 2012–2013 to 2018. During this period, Waldorf practitioners looked into their own traditional Chinese culture, literature, and practices and integrated a great variety of them into classroom teaching. A more critical lens was applied to the pieces of advice and the words of the Waldorf teachers or mentors from the West. A more solid and clear structure was established concerning organisation, management, and leadership. Some schools started to seek official school licences from the government by adjusting themselves to meet governmental requirements. The second stage, from 2012–2013 to 2018, witnessed the integration of traditional Chinese culture, literature, and practices into classroom teaching. A more critical approach was adopted towards advice from Western Waldorf teachers. Organisational and management structures became more stable and well-defined, with some schools seeking official government licences.

The current third stage, approximately from 2018 onwards, exhibits a formalised and structured phase, with many Waldorf schools acquiring official government licences. Some schools now include party members among their teaching staff to meet government requirements. However, there has been an upsurge in critiques from the general public and parents who withdrew their children from Waldorf schools. Consequently, some teachers and parents have disassociated themselves from Waldorf education. In my view, these stages may not necessarily follow a linear progression but rather coexist in different forms of Waldorf schools today.

### *Reputation and Discussion of Waldorf Education in Public and Academia*

Coupled with its anthroposophical background, Waldorf education is somewhat stigmatised among the general public in China. There has been a common

impression about Waldorf education: Waldorf schools are not “real” schools; they come with a “religious” or “cult-like” background<sup>5</sup> and most teachers are parents who do not hold official teaching qualifications. In recent years, many voices of criticism have been raised by parents who were disappointed with Waldorf education and have withdrawn their children from the Waldorf schools, which I will explore further in a later section. In recent years, many Waldorf schools changed names: they had to take the words “Waldorf” and “Steiner” out of the school’s name to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings or critique from the general public and the government.

There have been very few well-known Waldorf graduates, as the Waldorf movement in China is still relatively young. Few influential public figures or authors have been actively discussing or spreading Waldorf education in China. There used to be *China Waldorf Forum* (CWF) and *China Waldorf Early Childhood Education Forum* (CECEF), where discussions and seminars on Waldorf education were facilitated. Still, they were both shut down due to the lack of legal registration with the government. Currently, most Waldorf-related discussions are held on the personal blogs of some Waldorf teachers.

Generally speaking, Chinese academia is greatly influenced by the government. Many factors, such as the government’s position, national image, stability within the country, etc., must be considered when expressing opinions in academia. According to two central figures in the Waldorf movement whom I interviewed in early 2023, Waldorf education has never been officially accepted or recognised in mainstream academia, universities, or research institutes, nor has it been part of official teacher training or vocational training programs. Occasionally, Waldorf pedagogy was mentioned and briefly introduced in the teaching training programs, such as the teacher training programme at *Sichuan Normal University*. From time to time, a few academics in a few universities, such as *Beijing Normal University* and *Sichuan Normal University*, expressed their interest and views concerning Waldorf education.

In 2019, the *China Institute of Innovative Education* at *Beijing Normal University* and *Chengdu Waldorf School* collaboratively established a research centre dedicated to Waldorf education. I was involved during the initial phase for a period. Over 40 research projects were proposed and initiated under the guidance of scholars from various universities with an interest in Waldorf education. Certain topics were presented at the 2020 Educational Expo in Zhuhai. However, none of the research projects came to completion, and the Waldorf education research centre itself was short-lived.

5 In China, mainstream public schools follow a secular approach to education, which means they are officially non-religious and do not promote any particular religious belief, including atheism. The Chinese government practises strict separation of church and state, and religious education is not a part of the curriculum in public schools.

I conducted a literature review of Chinese-language publications on Waldorf education via the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI) database. The literature review reveals that researchers in China started researching Steiner education in the early 2000s. Most studies involved desk-based research, with the majority merely translations and summaries of foreign works on Steiner education (e.g. Fei, 2008; Wu & Huang, 2010; Zhang & Yang, 2008). They were mostly raising critical questions, which could be useful but would not have been empirically tested.

### *Perspective on Coloniality and Waldorf Education in China*

Colonialism is a system that “defines the organisation and dissemination of epistemic, material, and aesthetic resources in ways that reproduce modernity’s imperial project” (Andreotti & Stein, 2015, p. 23). What Said (1978) has referred to as “positional superiority” is helpful when conceptualising how knowledge and culture were part of imperialism, through which the West came to “know” the “Oriental” communities. Indigenous forms of knowledge were regarded as “new discoveries” by Western science, and “the globalisation of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilised’ knowledge” (Smith, 2012, p. 63).

At this stage, I would like to consider where to situate the Waldorf education movement in China in relation to the critiques of modernity and coloniality. I will suggest that the question of coloniality with regard to Waldorf education in China largely rests on the focal range of the lens through which one views the issue. As Gordon noted (cited in Houghton, 2012), the establishment of Waldorf schools outside of Europe could be considered a form of spiritual colonialism. Suppose one studies the matter with an eye for the particularities and pays less attention to the universal values that may be present within Waldorf education. In that case, one may agree with the views of Gordon. I want to stress that Gordon’s ideas relate to Waldorf education in the general global context and relate to relevant and valid concerns. In the context of my empirical research, adopting a more macro perspective, one may share the opinion of many of the Chinese Waldorf parents and teachers I spoke to that Steiner’s spirituality complemented their own. The issue is clearly complex, and it is not my wish or task to take a strong position; instead, I will explore some of the factors for consideration.

In the existing literature, numerous instances of Waldorf education are criticised for being self-referential and not moving with the times (e.g. Bolland, 2015; Ullrich, 2008). Scholars, such as da Souza, criticise the Waldorf curriculum that “privileges a certain body of knowledge (it is visibly Eurocentric)” (da Souza, 2012, p. 60). As a result, teachers and academics who are connected to Waldorf school communities on different continents have begun to draw attention to issues concerning the contextualisation and



localisation of Waldorf education and, specifically, how it manifests itself in non-European contexts (Boland, 2015; Rawson, 2010).

Oberman argued that “normative constructs” within the Waldorf curriculum limited adaptation processes to local cultural contexts. “The curriculum remains remarkably unchanged, even under the last decade’s pressures to disavow Eurocentrism [. . .]. [E]ven in inner-city Milwaukee, the Waldorf teachers continue to tell the Norse myth of Odin and Thor” (Oberman, 2008, p. 13). This opinion echoes criticism, both within and outside the movement, about the unquestioning continuation of past curricular and pedagogical models (see Boland, 2015; Wiechert, 2014).

To some extent, this criticism rings true in the Waldorf schools in Chinese settings, as many teachers I talked to questioned why they needed to teach the Norse myth of “Odin and Thor” in Chinese Waldorf schools. However, many of them also moved to adapt the curriculum accordingly and taught Chinese myths instead, which, considering the archetypal nature of myths, allowed their relevance to transcend cultural specificities and appeared to be a perfectly acceptable modification on the part of the Chinese schools. My empirical findings revealed that it was not unusual for Chinese teachers to incorporate traditional Chinese knowledge of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism as a way of interpreting anthroposophy and Waldorf education.

### **Parental Choice of and Experiences With Waldorf Education**

Waldorf schools in China, as alternative institutions located at the edges of cities, attract parents from various regions, some making significant sacrifices to enrol their children, including changing jobs and moving their families. Many parents chose Waldorf education to reject the current state system, expressing disappointment with its factual, utilitarian, examination-oriented approach, which causes stress among and pressure on students. They sought alternative ways to educate their children, leading them to opt for Waldorf schools.

Parents perceived Waldorf education as conducive to raising a healthy, happy, and holistic child with social awareness. The desire to cultivate critical thinking, ethical self-awareness, and individuality was prevalent among these families. They believed that a Waldorf education would help their children develop according to their inner spirit. Most parents expressed confidence in Waldorf education’s ability to fulfil these desires.

#### *Path towards and Experience With Waldorf Education*

Many parents I interviewed expressed their emotional and intellectual appeal towards Waldorf education, often sparked by social media interactions and school visits. Despite facing challenges and opposition from family and friends, many families proceeded with the move to Waldorf education, some at the cost of moving, changing jobs and even divorcing.

After enrolling their children in Waldorf schools, families experienced notable lifestyle changes. Parents spent more time engaging with their children, reducing screen time. A shift in lifestyle and outlook became evident, with a renewed appreciation for simple pleasures like cooking healthy meals together. Personal transformations were common, often accompanied by a slower pace of life and a greater sense of pleasure in modest living. These changes were inspired by the pursuit of a holistic education, and, over time, parents witnessed the positive impact on their hearts and minds.

Many parents also reported experiencing a healing process after entering the Waldorf system. For example, one mother shared: “I have seen so much change in parents; they seemed to be much softer, happier, and easier to communicate with; I felt something in them was healed.” The idea of education as a form of healing is consistent with anthroposophy. The kernel of the idea lies in the emphasis on removing obstacles that may block individuals from becoming “who they are.” Waldorf education aims to produce healthy individuals; this should be understood as holistic, relating to mental, spiritual, and physical health. It remains to be seen from the interviews precisely what the parents were referring to in terms of their own and other mothers’ healing experiences. However, I can relate from my personal encounters with parents that the healing they referred to often relates to wounds they felt had been inflicted upon them by the state education and to the busy, high-pressure lifestyle they might have had prior to engaging with Waldorf education.

Waldorf parents have witnessed a high level of self-expression in their children; this may be through art, dance, or practices such as observing nature. The experiences these Waldorf parents have of witnessing their children express themselves can sometimes serve to recast their own childhood. The Chinese state education, in many ways, dissuades individual expression (particularly true during the Maoist era), and even minor poetic flourishes find little sympathy under strict rote learning conditions. What certain Waldorf parents began to experience was a reliving of the repressed aspects of their own childhood. Some parents spoke about an “awakening,” or discovery of their “inner child,” the emotional development of which had stalled under the repressive conditions of state education and which had been “kick-started” by their interaction with the expressive aspects of Waldorf educational practices.

Experiencing their child’s healthy development had a profound healing effect on parents with past educational difficulties. Parents found that engaging with Waldorf education helped address traumas from their own state education, often dominated by endless exams and pressure. These powerful responses are not surprising when viewed through a psychological lens. Witnessing their child’s emotional growth can be transformative for parents who learned to suppress difficult experiences (Rogers, 2004).

While the majority of parents embraced Waldorf education, not all experienced exclusively positive changes. Some faced challenges, alienation, and even had to leave the Steiner system in extreme cases. Nevertheless, my

findings highlight how choosing Waldorf education became a catalyst for parents to initiate changes in their own lives. This shift is not surprising, given the contrast between the state education they had and the one they witnessed their children receiving. Engaging with the Waldorf education system exposed parents to new ideas and values that brought about a drastic change in their everyday life.

Despite choosing Waldorf education initially, not all Chinese Waldorf families fully embraced the broader aspects of anthroposophical ideas linked to this system. Exceptions were evident, with some parents only partially embracing Waldorf values in their lives, while others remained unconvinced during our discussions.

### *Contradictions and Dilemmas With Waldorf Education*

I heard the term *maodun* [contradiction] and *jiujie* [dilemma] frequently during my fieldwork. Most parents were strongly drawn by the ideals of Waldorf education: learning through creative activities, not giving too much homework or assessments and examinations to children, and providing a healthy and happy childhood. However, at the same time, these parents were genuinely concerned and questioning. How is my child, after their education, going to survive in a system characterised by solid bureaucratic structures of monitoring and assessment and credentials and the competitive social and economic environment they will face in China and abroad?

Several interlinked aspects of parental dilemmas associated with parental choice and Waldorf education experience are visible in my findings. Firstly, they were concerned about the level of knowledge their children would attain and the lack of homework and after-school tuition. Secondly, they expressed uncertainty about the opportunities Waldorf education could provide for children once they had graduated, including the difficulties of transferring from a Waldorf school to another education system prior to graduation and the chances of obtaining good test scores in examinations and passing the Gaokao, the *National College Entrance Examinations*. Additionally, they were concerned about how their children would meet the competitive job market demands. As a result, around year 6 or 7 (age 13 or 14), many families withdrew their children from the Waldorf schools and either sent them back into mainstream schools or transferred them to private schools.

### **Waldorf Education in Relation to Traditional Chinese Philosophies**

I noted specific pieces in the literature related to the relationship between Waldorf education and ancient Chinese values. Some news articles (e.g. Matuszak, 2014) have suggested that Chinese people have seen the Waldorf system as a reflection of their own culture in relation to the ideas of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and other Eastern philosophies. The same article (Matuszak, 2014) notes that an alternative educational method known

as *guoxue* [Chinese classical studies], emphasising art, Chinese calligraphy, music, and the philosophies of Confucius, Mencius, and Lao Tzu, dovetails with aspects of Waldorf education. Furthermore, an article by Cherry (2014), who was one of the leaders in the Waldorf education movement in China, also points to the ties between Waldorf education and traditional Confucian values. Wang's (2018) PhD thesis offers a valuable examination of the theoretical parallels between anthroposophy, Waldorf education, and Buddhism, of which he found many.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, the connection that parents and teachers were making between their experience of Waldorf education and their view of Chinese values became apparent and increasingly interesting. The similarities between the pedagogical approaches were often pointed out; however, I noted that the terms and language used were complicated to interpret. Terms such as "whole child" were used to describe a core Waldorf educational value. Another phrase repeatedly echoed by parents was that of wanting their child to "become who they are," a sentiment that bears a striking resemblance to the Taoist phrase *wu wei er zhi*. Parents often mentioned Taoism, comparing it to what they felt was the underlying philosophy of Waldorf education.

Across accounts of interviews, many parents and teachers in the Waldorf schools saw in the Steiner system a reflection of traditional Chinese culture in relation to the ideas of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, Taoism in particular. For example, Mr Miao, a Waldorf school founder, indicated: "What Steiner had chosen or pointed out was the same as what was in the thoughts of ancient Chinese."<sup>6</sup>

What is particularly noteworthy is that a number of parents and teachers revealed that through their research into Waldorf educational values, they could rediscover aspects of their own culture from which they felt they had become alienated. They often described how their discovery of Steiner's ideas helped inspire a return to their cultural and spiritual "roots." For example, Mr You, both a parent and a teacher at the Beijing Waldorf school, revealed how Waldorf education had helped him return to the Chinese traditional culture from the Western culture in which he had grown up:

I've always been in contact with Western culture. It is because of Waldorf education that I came to be in touch with the Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism, and Taoism. Waldorf education is like a key, which led me to return to my childhood.

6 According to certain parents and teachers, there are perceived parallels between Steiner education (and anthroposophy) and various aspects of traditional Chinese culture. In the domain of medicine, Mr Miao, a Steiner school founder, asserted that Steiner's "understanding of medical practice was greatly influenced by the European herbalists. European herbalists and traditional Chinese medicine doctors share a lot of similar principles." Additionally, he highlighted the resemblances in agricultural practices, stating: "Take biodynamic farming as another example, it is important to know that his [Steiner's] holistic ecological views on the soil, astronomy, geography, and ecology are very similar to those in traditional Chinese culture."

*Concerns of Loss of Chinese Traditional Values and Spirituality During China's Rapid Modernisation*

Many parents and school staff I interviewed were deeply concerned with China's rapid modernisation in the 20th century, which they felt was happening too quickly, without considering what was being lost in the process. Parents felt concerned about the lack of spirituality in the modern Chinese education system and the rapid rise in materialism. Palpable amongst the parents and teachers was a feeling of alienation from their own culture.

A large proportion of the data suggested a deep desire for a greater emphasis on spirituality and connection to the natural world. Parents and teachers mentioned that the relationship between *tian* [heaven], *di* [earth], and *ren* [human beings] was a prevalent part of people's lives in ancient times, something that is now considered to be missing.

In the traditional Chinese culture, people understand human beings and nature as being entwined and irrevocably interconnected (Nisbett, 2003). Examples of this interconnected understanding are present in many aspects of Chinese life, from its tradition of landscape painting, Chinese medicine, or martial arts. As Mrs Jiang, one Waldorf parent, illustrated:

In our law [in traditional Chinese culture], we have to lead a rhythmic life [. . .] like what to do in this time of the day, in this time of the season etc., this is the law of nature. Actually, in Waldorf education we also follow a certain rhythm and law.

To some extent, many parents and teachers believed that the spiritual element of Waldorf education had made it popular in China. For instance, Mrs Hua, a teacher-parent from the Chengdu Waldorf school, concluded that the Waldorf education movement met the needs of Chinese people longing for spirituality at this critical time.

[The Steiner movement] appeals to the current stage of development of Chinese society. When people's material foundation has been secured, the pursuit of spirituality naturally grows. Therefore, you may see that Waldorf education is viral and that [courses on] personal development, spiritual development and other types of alternative education are also very popular. This is a reflection of the current phase of development of Chinese society. Waldorf education emerged at the right time and met the needs of a group of people.

Many parents and teachers spoke about Waldorf education as a pathway back to finding something which has been lost in recent Chinese culture. As I have stated previously, traditional Chinese values suffered an identity crisis during modernisation. This led Chinese policy makers to abandon 2,500 years of philosophical tradition, which was radically accelerated during the Maoist era and continued after the opening-up policy of 1978. The Maoist

era strictly forbade even the philosophical thought of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and hence the sense of spiritual, philosophical, and political harmony, which existed for 2,500 years, was lost. In an informal conversation during my fieldwork, a Waldorf teacher offered this telling insight, “Regarding Chinese cultural heritage and development, it became stunted on the institutional level. The Marxist-Leninist materialist thought led by our communist Party contradicts the culture of Yin-Yang.” At an institutional level, ancient Chinese values were forsaken in a quest to adopt a Western paradigm in the name of modernisation.

### *Waldorf Education as Part of a Rebalancing/Healing Process for Chinese Education and Society*

For many parents and teachers, Waldorf education meets the needs of people who are deeply concerned about the various issues that contemporary globalised Chinese society is facing, such as the ecological crisis and materialism. For example, Mrs Lu, a former parent at the Beijing Waldorf school, illustrated:

[Waldorf education] caters for the problems of China at the developmental stage today. For example, we have modern ‘diseases’ of civilisation, and our current society is facing various issues, which perhaps to some extent is repeating the path that the West travelled.

Like Mrs Lu, who suggested that Waldorf education might be a solution to contemporary Chinese society’s problems, several parents and teachers also claimed that the Steiner movement in China could be seen as a medicine to help the unbalanced Chinese education system and society to become more balanced. For instance, one Waldorf father said, “The education system in China is too extreme, so the Waldorf education seems to be a kind of medicine.” Similarly, Mr Cheng, a Waldorf parent at the Beijing Waldorf school, also illustrates this point:

I think this transformation is what is needed in China [. . .]. More and more Chinese people who have become emotionally aware, they started to visit [this school] here, imitate and learn from here. [. . .] Then people will begin to reflect on themselves, meaning that a grounded transformation is taking place. We are hoping that slowly, this over-materialistic society will pay more attention to the development of spiritual and cultural qualities.

### *Steiner Spirituality Embedded in Experience*

My empirical findings suggest that for Chinese parents, the philosophical and spiritual foundations were essential in their opting for Waldorf education over other schools that offered similar pedagogical approaches. While

it is true that parents were not informed about anthroposophy in a detailed manner, they displayed at least a superficial understanding of Steiner's key theoretical components. I want to consider this claim concerning this quote from Spanish Waldorf teacher and academic scholar Patricia Quiroga Uceda (cf. Chapter 3 in this book):

Currently, most of the families who send their children to these schools are not motivated by the principles of anthroposophy or by the theoretical foundations of their pedagogy, but rather by the rhythms of learning which are more organic, the centrality of the art components of the curriculum, the relationship with nature, and the cultivation of an ecological consciousness. Within the contemporary educational landscape, for a public eager for alternatives in education, Waldorf schools have found their place by distancing themselves from dominant paradigms grounded in effectiveness and measurement.

(Quiroga Uceda, 2016, p. 17)

This assessment within a European context aligns with my findings in this study of the Chinese context. Chinese Waldorf parents were rarely familiar with the specific content of anthroposophy. Their motivation towards Waldorf education lies less in its theory and more in its experiential aspects. Quiroga Uceda usefully notes the notion of the "rhythm" of learning, which is different from the specific learning content. This is an important distinction when considering the relevance of spirituality within the Chinese context.

The spiritual approach of Waldorf education needs not be identical in content to the ancient Chinese practices of Buddhism and Taoism. The significance of spirituality in Waldorf education is felt primarily at the level of an underlying pattern, or rhythm, which might be described as a "way" or "Tao." It is related to the internal relation of one's spiritual life to being as a whole rather than the specific cultural contexts in which that may be expressed. That is to say, Chinese parents may appreciate aspects of Waldorf education not necessarily because it shares specific content with Taoism, for example, but rather because it expresses a recognisable rhythm or attunement with a way of being. The underlying patternations of expression, articulated in Waldorf education may be recognisable to Chinese people familiar with traditional Chinese values.

Anyone who has ever found themselves in a foreign country, without recourse to the ability to communicate in the local tongue, may understand the sense of disorientation this experience can engender and consequently the relief, even sense of joy, one feels at having their expressions met with a sympathetic smile, indicative of the understanding of another. My feeling is that Chinese Waldorf parents experience a similar sense of recognition in what may be termed the values, beliefs, philosophies, or ways of being, which are reflected at an experiential level in Waldorf schools. Perhaps Chinese traditional values can be understood to be in a paratactical relationship with



Waldorf education values, with the notion of “holism” providing the central position around which these frameworks orbit.

To conclude this section, many parents and teachers in the Waldorf schools viewed the current mainstream education system and Chinese society as unbalanced due to the modernisation process and the loss of traditional values and spirituality. Even though Waldorf education had emerged from Western Europe, it had acted as a catalyst for many Chinese parents and teachers in Steiner education to help them rediscover aspects they felt were missing from their own culture. There was a widespread sense that the presence of Waldorf education in China was going to have a significant impact on Chinese society. Often these beliefs and hopes appeared idealistic and ambitious. There was a genuine sense of excitement and hope related to the Waldorf movement in China: Waldorf education could provide something for the Chinese people that had been lost during the Cultural Revolution: a more spiritual and aesthetic appreciation of life. I was struck by the passion with which the parents and teachers spoke; their optimism was infectious and convincing. For the parents and teachers I interviewed, there was a deep sense that Waldorf education represented much more for the Chinese people than simply another education fad or some passing phenomenon with no lasting cultural impact.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter, to some extent, pioneers an important international discussion on the Waldorf education movement in China. It explores the significant growth of Steiner (Waldorf) education in the country and its potential in addressing challenges within mainstream education and modern Chinese society. Through in-depth ethnographic research at two Waldorf schools, the chapter investigates parental school choices, experiences with Waldorf education, and its alignment with traditional Chinese values. By contextualising Waldorf education within China’s educational, social, and cultural contexts, it sheds light on the diverse interpretations of this approach in Chinese schools. Additionally, the chapter examines the reputation and academic discussions surrounding Waldorf education in the public sphere.

In summary, parents chose Waldorf education for a variety of reasons. Dissatisfaction with the state school system’s instrumental and exam-focused approach drove them to seek alternatives. They were drawn to Waldorf’s child-centred approach, promoting a free, healthy, and socially aware childhood. Enrolling their children in Waldorf schools brought significant lifestyle changes, fostering a slower, healthier, and more modest way of life with increased quality time together. Parents also experienced personal growth, embracing a holistic approach to education. However, uncertainties about the future and concerns about their children passing the Gaokao examination remained for some parents.

The convergence between Waldorf education’s emphasis on the organic unfolding of an individual’s spirit and Taoist thinking emerged as a significant

discovery. This alignment struck a chord with parents and teachers alike, especially in a historical context where there is a yearning for a return to holistic and spiritually centred development. Many participants viewed Waldorf education as a process-based model that mirrors the fluidity of Taoism rather than a rigid belief system. It is through this profound connection with traditional Chinese philosophies that Waldorf education captivated parents and teachers, providing a pathway for reconnection with the holistic and spiritual aspects of their heritage that had been eroded during the course of modernisation.

In conclusion, as China grapples with educational challenges and societal changes, Waldorf education emerges as a promising alternative that not only offers a different pedagogical approach but also carries the potential to preserve and revitalise traditional wisdom. By nurturing a generation that embraces both modernity and tradition, Waldorf education can weave together a tapestry of wisdom that bridges the past and the present, enriching the cultural fabric of Chinese society.

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## 9 Patterns, Players, Perspectives

### Epilogue on the International Reputation and Discussion on Waldorf Education

*Ann-Kathrin Hoffmann and Marc Fabian Buck*

The search for traces of how Waldorf education is discussed and received in public and academic discourse unexpectedly leads to the question of what the leading factors are for its respective perception in both science and society. Both discourses are characterised by intricate, convoluted relations. A look at the actors involved enables us to learn about their place within the respective educational system and leads back to the transfer paths and mechanisms that have contributed to its active reception, implementation, and internalisation (cf. Steiner-Khamsi, 2003; as cited in Rakhkochkine, 2009, p. 1044). As different as the historical and socio-cultural frameworks are and were at the national level, patterns in reception and discourse can be identified across the case studies of this two-volume book project. Six of these patterns, enriched by findings from previous Waldorf educational research, are presented here in the form of theses and are further differentiated. These are, of course, not clear-cut and static, but they rather show tendencies and illuminate the developments and interactions from different perspectives in order to shed some light on an educational success story as well as its downsides.

#### **First: Expansion by Self-Uprooting?**

The distance between Waldorf education and anthroposophy is increasing, both (1) in the longitudinal section of different generations of teachers and (2) in the cross-section of more diverse teaching staff. Nevertheless, (3) practitioners and consumers continue to refer to and identify with Steiner and anthroposophy in an increasingly less informed, traditional way.<sup>1</sup>

(1) From “Herr Doktor,” who himself was still partly known personally or at least whose lectures were known first hand, to the merely formulaic “Steiner,” Ansgar Martins (2023a, pp. 43–44) had already established, with reference to Rahel Uhlenhoff and Taja Gut and with regard to the

1 With regard to the increasing denial of anthroposophical foundations among academic representatives of Waldorf education as a further indication of a distancing from Rudolf Steiner, see *Fifth: Anthroposophy – Achilles’ Heel of Waldorf Education?*

German-speaking debate and analysis of various generations of anthroposophists, that they tended to become more relaxed in their dealings with their source of ideas over the course of time. Such distancing can also be recognised in the founding of schools today. They are hardly ever founded by anthroposophists but rather by parents who see themselves in opposition to the state school system – for example, in Germany (Ullrich, 2024) and Japan (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024) – or even in dual opposition to both the state and the Catholic Church, for instance in Poland (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024). In Slovenia as the first public school after gaining independence (cf. Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024) and as a grassroots movement in China, the reason for new foundations seems to be primarily state-oppositional rather than pro-anthroposophical (Sun, 2024). Heiner Barz (2013, pp. 317–318) initially described this generational difference for teachers at German Waldorf schools as an open question about the shift “from Puritanism to pragmatism.” While the first generation of teachers was characterised by idealistic self-sacrifice and a lack of material needs, which led to a high “self-efficacy yield,” the second generation was probably still oriented towards the ideal of the founding teachers, but the conflict between their admiration and the perception of their own needs (income, holidays) had arisen. As a result, the unconditional identification with the school decreased, which intensified further with the third generation. The ideals are subject to a pragmatic adaptation to the reality of one’s own life; there is a more sober cost–benefit calculation in relation to private needs and at the same time committed educational work.

It can be assumed that this is not a phenomenon limited to Germany. In a more general way, Neil Boland (2015), following Ida Oberman (2008), describes such a change for supra-individual phenomena such as currents within the Waldorf movement and Waldorf educational organisations. He demonstrates this on the basis of changed modes of reception. Firstly, there is the *puristic* mode of reception of Steiner, which sees no need for change due to the fundamental functioning of the pedagogy. Rather, what is needed is:

keeping to the given path, being ‘faithful’ to traditions and practices which have been built up over the decades – over-reliance on tradition which can lead to a perceived lack of flexibility, a rigidity in approach, and eventually the danger of dogmatism.

(Boland, 2015, pp. 197–198)

Secondly, there is a mode of reception described as *accommodationist*, a hybridisation:

between ‘Steiner’ methodologies and new pedagogical styles and language (including contemporary educational jargon). In theory, these can be helpful developments, open-minded and positive. An issue could however be that the hybrids created are not necessarily recognisable as education based on the work of Rudolf Steiner.

(Boland, 2015, pp. 197–198)



This approach can also be understood as rather additive, as a kind of “contributionism” and blending, as described by Kung-Pei Tang (2010), among others, for the situation in Taiwan, with the possible effect that there can be a great deal of diffusion in the question of what the underlying anthroposophy (still) is (Zander, 2019, p. 226). Boland (2015, p. 197) describes a third mode of reception as *evolutionist*:

[A]dapting to local situations, changed contexts and a different century. This involves going back to the indications Steiner gave a century ago and seeing how they can be used in the twenty-first century in utterly different settings than originally given, whether in Europe or beyond. This could be an evolutionary and creative process, not one of accretion or adding things to what is existing. Guidelines for this need developing.

In an international comparison, these “ideal types” show themselves in different modes and stages of reception. For the situation in Spain, Patricia Quiroga Uceda (2024) points out that, due to the German origins in teacher training, “origins were mainly purist,” “over time shifting to evolutionist tendencies.” Manya Oriel Kagan et al. (2024) describe the situation in Kenya in a very similar way, with teacher training at schools and training centres founded by Germans and Swiss in South Africa, which is now carried out in Kenya by Kenyans and includes the integration of local traditions and knowledge. Yifan Sun (2024) also reconstructed the reception of anthroposophy for Waldorf schools in China in a comparable way. In Japan, according to Atsuhiko Yoshida and Yoshiyuki Nagata (2024), the sequence of these three stages can even be identified in the academic and journalistic debate on the theoretical and historical superstructure: at the beginning, mainly introductory works on anthroposophy and Waldorf education were published, followed by explanations of methods and the curriculum of Waldorf education. The first generation “introduced knowledge from Europe and worked to spread it through the publication of translations and other books” and thus sowed the seeds for the spread of Waldorf education there (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 15). In the subsequent consolidation phase, comparative and historical works predominated before Waldorf education was finally researched using methods that lay outside of itself. To a certain extent, the second generation is characterised by “discomfort and practical innovations” (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 17), especially in relation to German and European knowledge, narratives and teaching content, such as in the case of the St. Michael’s festival with – as is common in European but not Japanese folklore – evilly instead of positively connoted dragons. At the same time, this generation can be credited with “[putting] Steiner education on track by working to realise educational practice through building schools” (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 15). A third generation can currently be identified, which is described as “uniqueness in operation” (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 19) and stands for a progressive differentiation of Waldorf education as a practice.

The change described by Heiner Barz “from puritanism to pragmatism” among Waldorf teachers can therefore also be observed in the founding of

new schools and the reception of anthroposophy as a whole, whereby there appear to be factors that accelerate this process with increasing geographical, cultural, and religious distance from the German-speaking centre. Indications of this are, for example, the difference between accredited and non-accredited schools. David Nikias (2014, p. 2) reports only four recognised Waldorf schools in India, compared to 50 “Waldorf-inspired schools”; similarly, Yifan Sun (2024) reports 77 newly founded schools in China against six officially listed in the Waldorf World List. This deviation from the previous strict accreditation practice can also be seen on the organisational side in the Waldorf-related characteristics that have not yet been adopted by the *Hague Circle* but that have been published (!) as a supplement to the mandatory characteristics of Waldorf education (Hague Circle, 2016, pp. 7–9). There appears to be a need to lower the hurdles for interested initiatives for whom the complete package of an anthroposophical art of education is (still) difficult to sell but which at the same time may not yet be fully recognised by the *Hague Circle*. This thesis is also supported by other national initiatives, such as the possibility of post-qualification for teachers already practising in Waldorf schools but not (yet) appropriately trained in Taiwan (Tang, 2010, pp. 29–30) or recognition of the fact that hardly any external help and training are necessary, as described by Mary Lee Plumb-Mentjes (2012, p. 28), for the situation in Russia. Irish teachers, on the other hand, seem to take the opposite approach: For them, too, adaptation to national and local contexts is necessary; however, according to Thomas Stehlik (2019, p. 169), the view is that the prerequisite for this is high-quality teacher training and their appreciation of the core elements of Steiner’s curriculum. The importance that anthroposophy has and can have in the respective Waldorf schools depends not least on the role that Waldorf schools play within the national education system. In Finnish Waldorf schools, for example, anthroposophy is less significant due to relatively far-reaching processes of adaptation and integration into the national education system (Mansikka, 2024). Instead, from a central European perspective, these are merely “Waldorf-inspired schools,” which are representative of the “trend” of “playing down the tradition and being open to new research and development in education, but without losing their own identity” (Mansikka, 2024, p. 195).

(2) This increasing distancing from Steiner’s original principles over time is reinforced by a very pragmatic problem that becomes apparent in the cross-section: the lack of suitably qualified and committed teachers. In West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, the shortage of Waldorf-qualified teachers was so great in view of the expansion of education that a de facto ban was imposed on the founding of new Waldorf schools (Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 225; Ullrich, 2024). This is a hitherto unique phenomenon, the causes of which are likely to have worsened in view of the continuing expansion of education and a general shortage of skilled labour in the education sector as well as the international spread of Waldorf schools (Randoll, 2013a, p. 9). The result was a high turnover of teaching staff and a lower anthroposophical penetration

of the teaching staff at Waldorf schools. The diversity of teachers' knowledge of and proximity to anthroposophy is correspondingly considerable: while in Germany, for example, around 40% of teachers at Waldorf schools are now not Waldorf-qualified (Randoll, 2013b, pp. 60–61), in the Netherlands (van der Want et al., 2024) or in Poland (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024), they are still very close to Steiner's positions today or even form relatively closed communities, as in Slovenia (Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024). In between are constellations such as in Finland, which can be described as "oscillating between traditional and progressive views" (Mansikka, 2024, p. 191), or teaching staff who practice Waldorf education in an "unquestioning, over-reliant on tradition" manner rather than on the basis of their own engagement with anthroposophical principles (Boland, 2015, p. 195). The reasons for the high level of diversity are manifold and range from a consciously pragmatic distance to anthroposophy (e.g. in Kenya and China: Kagan et al., 2024, p. 107; Sun, 2024, p. 163) to a lack of opportunity or willingness to engage with Steiner's complex work in depth (as in China, for example: Sun, 2024, p. 164). Consequently, ignorance of the anthroposophical foundations of Waldorf education appears to be of central importance. A great lack of knowledge about Steiner and what Waldorf education actually derives from can be observed not only among teachers but also among parents and pupils (for Germany: Martins, 2024; for Israel: Koren, 2024). This can be seen particularly clearly in the example of Nepal, where "most of the parents are not well-informed about what Waldorf education is" and are very pleased that they can access information about Waldorf education via the internet, which is not necessarily considered best practice in Europe or the Americas (Stehlik, 2019, p. 173). Educating both uninformed parents and teachers about Waldorf education and its principles is thus becoming a significant and increasing challenge (Stehlik, 2019, pp. 187–188; exemplified by Finland: Mansikka, 2024), with the added complication that parents in particular are often not specifically interested in Waldorf education but in education in general, as Thomas Stehlik (2019, p. 175) states for Portugal, for example, and van der Want et al. (2024) and Sun (2024) similarly note for the Netherlands and China. The situation is different in Slovenia, however, where parents are encouraged to be familiar with anthroposophy and actively integrate it into their lives (Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024).

(3) The changing composition of teaching staff is also accompanied by a change in the way Waldorf schools and associations present themselves; explicit references to anthroposophy and its originator are becoming rarer. In the campaign to recruit new Waldorf teachers in the Netherlands, for example, there are no references to anthroposophy or Steiner (van der Want et al., 2024), and the Norwegian *Steinerbladet* presents itself as an educational alternative focussing on art, crafts, and ecology (Stabel & Barkved, 2024). In Austria, self-presentation takes place at a distance from the anthroposophical basis of Waldorf education (Geppert, 2024). As Jürgen Oelkers (2024, p. 147) points out for Switzerland, these self-presentations are tailored to

parents: “They are told to choose a school system that works with epoch classes, early foreign languages, and text reports.” Especially as a public school, which in most countries is fully or at least partially financed by parents, self-promotion must also be understood as target group-oriented advertising that generates demand and thus ensures the continued existence of the school. It can therefore be assumed that there is a strategic interest in the presentation as “just” an educational alternative to the mainstream, which needs to be analysed empirically in more detail.

If this diagnosis of a fundamentally increasing distance between Waldorf education and anthroposophy – despite all the relativisations and exceptions mentioned – is correct, then the differentiating question arises as to what exactly is the distance keeping us from? According to Kung-Pei Tang (2010, pp. 29–30, 139), this would be an anthroposophical, i.e. universal and untouched core rooted in the European tradition of thought, as expressed, for example, in the *Kulturstufenplan* [culture epoch theory]; for Volker Frieblingsdorf-er (2019, pp. 360–361), it is even more fundamentally Steiner’s teaching of anthropology, developmental psychology, and the methodological principles derived from them. Similarly, Neil Boland and Dirk Rohde (2022, p. 26) describe the “unique characteristics” they have identified, which they see in anthroposophy as “the spiritual foundation of Waldorf education,” in “a specific artistic approach to teaching which is responsive to the context in which it happens” and in the fact that “teachers are jointly responsible for the school they are teaching in,” whereby “the form in which Waldorf education manifests cannot be fixed.” They argue that anthroposophy’s supratemporality, which is expressed in these aspects, is the unique selling point and constitutive element of Waldorf education per se:

More specifically, to connect successfully to the essence of Steiner education in the realm of the eternal, one needs to take a guideline of Anthroposophy in order to distinguish Steiner education from other forms of education [. . .]. Without this connection between the physical realm and this specific area of the spiritual world, Steiner teaching will undergo a slow process of dying away, of decline.

(Boland & Rohde, 2022, p. 28)

For these authors with close ties to the Waldorf movement, it is clear that anthroposophy is of more fundamental importance to Waldorf education than just having methodological or heuristic significance, also and especially in its renewal, which is tantamount to a return to its origins:

Calls for ‘renewal’, ‘revitalisation’, modernisation, increased contextualisation and similar can be approached anew by considering how ever-changing and increasingly diverse contemporary situations interact at different speeds and in different ways with what is eternal in Steiner education.

(Boland & Rohde, 2022, p. 29)

Frielingsdorf (2019, pp. 360–361) sees this timeless anthroposophical core as the fertility and success factor for the international spread of Waldorf education, as it opens up opportunities for individual adaptations – albeit without the necessary reflection on which content and elements are suitable for “cultural transfer” and which are not. And this is what is needed, as the core certainly has a normative effect and poses challenges for local cultures, some of which are very difficult to adapt to anthroposophical principles, as Thijs Jan van Schie (2020, p. 84) points out using the example of the Philippines. And attempts, such as in China, to invite Waldorf practitioners from the United States, Germany, or Oceania and – despite all cultural differences – to learn from them about Waldorf principles also point to the idea of an “original” core, of which Western anthroposophists in particular are aware (Sun, 2024). Elsewhere, however, an “indigenisation policy” dominates, which focuses on the claims of cultural, religious, or ethnic minorities to their own identity within a globalised society and which sees Waldorf schools as a place to realise this, as for example in Taiwan, where the hope for corresponding Steiner-inspired changes in the school system persists (Tang, 2010, p. 8). Consequently, there is a heterogeneous field of tension between supratemporal anthroposophy and alternative educational practice. For their part, the globally active *Friends of Waldorf Education* strive to ensure quality assurance and homogenisation at Waldorf schools by means of clearly structured teacher training that is supported financially and in terms of personnel, sometimes to such an extent that it is interpreted as “tutelage” (for Taiwan: Tang, 2010, p. 35). Distancing evokes counter-movements.

## **Second: “Alternative Education, Whether Waldorf Education or Not”**

Parents’ and teachers’ affection for Waldorf education and its positive image in educational science and among the general public are fuelled above all by its alternative, rather than anthroposophical character. Waldorf schools thus benefit from many educational trends as well as from a growing trend in society to look for alternative lifestyles. These contexts sometimes present themselves as a particularly compatible alternative to what the given state has to offer, sometimes as an established alternative and sometimes as the one that claims the most autonomy for itself (1). The positive expectations, in (supposed) contrast to state schools, of a child-centred, holistic, less intellectualistic pedagogy with less pressure to perform (2) coincide with the feared negative consequences when it comes to being able to meet the demands of the market and neoliberal society after finishing school (3).

(1) The often utilitarian relationship to anthroposophy, as also formulated by Helmut Zander (2019, p. 55), is expressed, among other things, in a distancing from Steiner while at the same time praising Waldorf education, such as in Austria (Geppert, 2024) or in the fact that there are explicitly non-anthroposophical kindergartens in Israel (Koren, 2024) that nevertheless claim to work according to anthroposophical criteria. As Israel Koren (2024,

p. 27) points out: “Waldorf education has [. . .] become a ‘brand’ in Israel, permeating public consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Stehlik (2019, p. 175) found something similar for Portugal, where “parents are more and more interested in an alternative education, whether Waldorf education or not”; this attitude can also be observed in Finland (Mansikka, 2024) and Spain (Quiroga Uceda, 2024). In other cases, e.g. Israel and France, ideals such as holism seem to play a more important or complementary role in the decision in favour of a Waldorf school (Koren, 2024, p. 33; Kolly, 2024, p. 123). Although there is a high potential for alumni to identify with their former schools, this is not because of anthroposophy, which they tend to be indifferent to or sceptical about (Barz & Randoll, 2007, p. 19; see also Ullrich, 2024, p. 38; Hoffmann, 2024, p. 90). The decisive factors for the decision in favour of a Waldorf school therefore seem to lie more in those ideas and practices that function as responses to experiences of modernisation and alienation, as Yifan Sun (2024, p. 173) shows in a particularly impressive manner for China. This seems to be a continuity of reform pedagogy: you get what you expect, and these expectations – of a progressive education as a better alternative, for example – are fuelled both rhetorically and by disappointment with the existing state of affairs (Oelkers, 2024, p. 138).

This attraction to anything that offers itself as an alternative to the state’s educational offering seems to be subject to a wave-like boom and is currently repeating what was already acute in the 1970s:

The considerable growth of the Waldorf school movement and the parallel disillusionment with the lack of success of the school reform movements of the 1970s inevitably led to Waldorf education increasingly becoming the focus of public interest.

(Frielingsdorf, 2019, p. 309)

In Spain, too, there was initial contact with Waldorf education at a time when criticism of a technocratic education system was emerging (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 58), while in France Waldorf schools benefited from the trend towards other alternative pedagogies (Kolly, 2024, p. 124). The situation is somewhat different in China: here, it was the simultaneous disappointment with other reform concepts that helped Waldorf education to flourish (Sun, 2024, p. 173). The never-ending debate about adequate teacher training, constant pressure for reform (for example, in the calls for new school subjects), reports of shortcomings (in terms of buildings, staff shortages, etc.) once again favoured Waldorf education. While Oelkers (2024, pp. 139–140) justifies the low importance of private schools in general and Waldorf schools in

2 This is also a parallel to Montessori education, which became a brand back in the 1930s thanks to its strict licensing model. To this day, the Montessori Diploma is proof of this practice of self-positioning on the market.

particular in Switzerland with the high level of satisfaction with state schools, Kung-Pei Tan (2010, pp. 2–3) reports the opposite: the inception of Waldorf education in Taiwan, which took place in the course of an alternative school movement, is based on dissatisfaction with the existing education system. As a result, the latter even appears to be a global trend: “Since the 2000s, Waldorf education has spread to countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This trend partly coincides with emerging middle classes (e.g. Johnson, 2014), who embrace [...] critical views on national education systems” (van Schie, 2020, p. 74). The pattern of emphasising “being different from the mainstream” as a pedagogy, as Geppert (2024, p. 172) describes it for Austria, threatens to degenerate into a formalised end in itself.

Parents and teachers, on whose initiative schools are usually founded and who are the pillars of the school community, seem to be characterised by a very strong desire for self-administration and sovereignty (cf. Rawson, 2021, pp. 138–141; Boland & Rohde, 2022, p. 25, for the example of Taiwan: Tang, 2010, p. 145). The greatest possible interpretation of school autonomy often goes hand in hand with a notable willingness to participate on the part of parents and teachers, also in connection with a certain demand for quality and idealism (for the example of Germany: Ullrich, 2024, pp. 27, 41). The Waldorf schools’ own claim to their alternative status is therefore far-reaching: they should have the highest possible degree of school autonomy and teaching freedom, which – in line with Steiner’s idea of Social Threefolding<sup>3</sup> – coincides with their own teacher training facilities and their constitution as public schools, although the formal realisation of this autonomy is, of course, subject to state, regional, and local legislation and possibilities; like other alternative schools, Waldorf schools cannot absolve themselves of their political nature. Waldorf schools utilise the greater pedagogical freedoms of public schools in many places, which go beyond state requirements (for the Netherlands: van der Want et al., 2024, p. 98) or those of a religious nature (for Spain: Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 60). In some cases, their own freedom seems to be more important for the practical work of Waldorf schools than state recognition: in Japan, five out of seven schools are organised as non-profit organisations (NPOs) and are not approved within the formal public education system (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 4). In India (Nikias, 2014) and China (Sun, 2024), the number of Waldorf schools without a licence clearly exceeds the number of those accredited. This raises the question of the relationship between Waldorf schools and the state in two respects. Firstly, can the respective political system in which Waldorf schools

3 The *Soziale Dreigliederung* [Social Threefold] is Steiners’ preferred model of society, characterised by the separation of the political, economic, and cultural spheres under the dominance of cultural, spiritual life (Zander, 2019, pp. 175–176). For anthroposophists, Waldorf education is one expression of this idea, as “a field of experimentation on a small scale for society as a whole” (Zander, 2019, p. 186).



operate the schools' ideological-religious character be reconciled within the states' perspective; after all, schools are places where values are reproduced, and they are thus a central area of political conflict in the struggle for interpretation and social influence. Secondly, with regard to the parents' need for demarcation, when deciding in favour of the Waldorf school as a public school, is the (distanced) relationship of this very school to the state or its educational programme the guiding factor?

Irrespective of these normative questions, it should be noted that the realisation of the claim to autonomy through private sponsorship is not without its financial and bureaucratic consequences. This is particularly true when schools are founded (Stehlik, 2019), but it is also evident in the course of cuts in state funding, as Louise deForest (2011, p. 20) shows using the example of Hungary. In Poland, strong self-will even led to a break with the *Solidarność* movement (solidarity), which had previously helped Waldorf education to gain recognition (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, p. 80). Time and again, the Waldorf movement also has to make concessions and submit to state frameworks, for example in the attempt to attain state accreditation of teacher training and other educational fields in Hungary (de Forest, 2011, p. 21), or in the face of special political observation and control of public schools in China (Cherry, 2019, p. 212), where curricula are also influenced by the need to integrate state requirements (Sun, 2024, p. 164). Problems also arise in organisational differences: in the Netherlands, for example, the restructuring of school hours and qualifications is a problem for the Waldorf concept (van der Want et al., 2024, p. 110). In Switzerland, Waldorf schools are required to keep up with educational policy developments in order to prevent their own marginalisation (Oelkers, 2024, p. 133), whereas in Finland they are legally protected and financially supported, but the tension between the educational freedom of an alternative school and the national guidelines remains (Mansikka, 2024, pp. 178–179).

(2) Basically, there is a whole range of positive perceptions of Waldorf schools in the public eye, transcending national and continental borders (and naturally more pronounced among Waldorf parents than among the general population). In addition to the perceived high degree of idealism, these include pedagogically positive basic values such as naturalness, creativity, holism; soft skills such as social interaction, social responsibility and personality development; practical learning with natural-ecological materials, etc., as well as clear negative distinctions, for example, from “intellectualism” and a “*Zeitgeist*” in science, business, and society that is described as rational and cold (cf. Ullrich, 2024, pp. 28, 31; van der Want et al., 2024, p. 110; Geppert, 2024, p. 161; Mansikka, 2024, pp. 180, 184; Quiroga Uceda, 2024, pp. 46–48; Kagan et al., 2024, pp. 98, 101; Kolly, 2024, p. 124; Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 147; Sun, 2024, p. 169). Of course, there is also a relation to technological development and its influence on schools, which parents imagine as a safe space for their children (Nikias, 2014, p. 3). As Benjamin David Hennig and John Paull (2020, p. 29) point out: “Waldorf education offers analogue

education in a digital world.” Fitting into the anthroposophical interpretation of the world:

[the] [i]nformation technology revolution is so rapid that it is making people look on intellectual development even more seriously. The materialistic social environment, heavy pressure and the extremely restless life rhythm are constantly spawning a variety of educational problems and social problems. In this case, correct recognition and pursuit of the value and meaning of life are so particularly important.

(Zhanhua et al., 2017, p. 163)

The reasons for the generally positive attitude include the fact that Waldorf education is an “established alternative to mainstream education” with “soft values” (Mansikka, 2024, p. 183), which knows how to distance and distinguish itself from the real socialist school system. In Poland, for example (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, pp. 83–84), Waldorf education symbolises and represents a refuge from excessive state influence on education (for Israel: Koren, 2024, p. 36). At the same time, it protects against cognitivism and offers a counter-model to the examination system of an elitist education system (for Taiwan: Tang, 2010, pp. 3–5; for Kenya: Kagan et al., 2024, p. 102; for Slovenia: Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 140). In view of the expectations placed on it and the characteristics associated with it, Waldorf education generally appears as a counter-programme to state schools and the market principles that influence them and society, even in an anti-colonial interpretation as in Kenya (cf. Kagan et al., 2024, p. 105). The oral and social components of Waldorf schools in particular are perceived as positive, operationalised through plays and storytelling as didactic tools (Mansikka, 2024, p. 180), whereby it appears to be compatible with local and regional traditions such as the southern African *Ubuntu* (Kagan et al., 2024, pp. 94, 97). The “essence” of the perceived advantages of Waldorf education can be considered to be child-centredness, a holistic, humanistic view of humanity, and the importance of Arts & Craft (in general: Stehlik, 2019; Rawson, 2021, p. 186; for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 25; for the Netherlands: van der Want et al., 2024, p. 109; for Switzerland: Oelkers, 2024, p. 142). All of this makes Waldorf education a “legitimate example of counter-practice” (Rawson, 2021, p. 195), as Bo Dahlin (2010, p. 49) also puts it: “Waldorf education promotes cosmopolitan concepts of identity that are orientated towards a universal view of humanity. Such an educational impulse offers a necessary counterweight to the global forces of the market.”

Particularly in view of the combination of increasing mechanisation and concurrent acceleration, many people expect Waldorf education to have a healing effect: “Waldorf education came as a healing balm desperately needed in a high-speed electronic world that fractionalises and desensitises the human being in so many different ways” (Nikias, 2014, pp. 2–3). This hope is supported by less pressure to take exams and perform (Rawson, 2021,

p. 186) and less standardisation (for Spain: Quiroga Uceda, 2024, pp. 48, 63; for China: Sun, 2024, p. 155). The depersonalisation associated with the latter is a powerful argument for Waldorf education, especially among Native Americans, to whom Waldorf presents itself as a counter-proposal (Muñoz, 2016, pp. 177–178). Overall, these are arguments for an atmosphere of respect and trust towards pupils (Ullrich, 2024, p. 23) and more pedagogical freedom for teachers (Rawson, 2021, p. 186); the regular festivals (Oberman, 2008, pp. 233–234), and traditions do the rest. Although there is a need to translate the content of the latter into the respective national, regional, and local circumstances, Waldorf focusses on oral traditions and aspects of movement and painting/drawing, as traditional cultural techniques facilitate such a transfer, as can be illustrated using the example of Chinese characters (Cherry, 2019; Sun, 2024, pp. 164–165).

(3) Many of the characteristics just mentioned – when turned into negatives – also form the starting point for scepticism and rejection in the public debate. These include the lack of compatibility with the current performance paradigm of modern societies and performance demands on individuals, which Waldorf education is assumed to be unable to fulfil. Formal transitions between school levels are therefore also perceived as major hurdles. In terms of content, it is above all the fears of a lack of preparation for “real life” and the future (e.g. in Austria: Geppert, 2024, p. 160), which are suspected, among other reasons, because of the late learning of writing and the renunciation of technology (for an example, see Kenya: Kagan et al., 2024, p. 108). In China, the fear of the non-recognition of qualifications and a lack of flexibility with regard to achievement and future opportunities for children dominate (Sun, 2024, pp. 167–168; Cherry, 2019, p. 212). From a didactic and pedagogical perspective, there is notable criticism of the lack of quality in subject-specific teaching and too little openness to newer pedagogical developments (for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 38); feared or proven knowledge deficits, especially in science-heavy subjects (e.g. in Germany: Martins, 2024, p. 50 and Austria: Geppert, 2024, pp. 160, 167); the unscientific nature (for Kenya: Kagan et al., 2024, p. 107; for France: Kolly, 2024, pp. 129, 131; for Slovenia: Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 149); and the deviation from the national curriculum (using the example of Japan: Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 13), all of which strengthen reservations about Waldorf schools. On a curricular level, there is also the accusation of privileged, Eurocentric knowledge (e.g. in China: Sun, 2024, p. 168); on an organisational level, there is criticism of inefficiency and lack of transparency (for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 41) or the school organisation as a whole (see France as an example: Kolly, 2024, p. 125). In terms of personnel, there is widespread and serious criticism worldwide of the supposed or actual lack of qualifications of teachers (e.g. China: Sun, 2024, p. 167), as well as their dogmatic to indocinating behaviour and their esoteric to sect-like school character (Martins, 2024, p. 50; Geppert, 2024, pp. 160, 171; Mansikka, 2024, p. 181; Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 48; Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, p. 81; Kolly, 2024, pp. 117,

125; Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 147; Sun, 2024, p. 167). Waldorf education sometimes has the public image of a “school for those who cannot cope with the regular school system” (Geppert, 2024, p. 159).

### **Third: Between the “Educated Middle-Class Private School Audience” and Conspiracy Theorists**

The teachers and parents, and consequently the pupils and graduates, who opt for this type of school are mainly from the left-liberal middle class, who seek to realise their middle-class educational ideas by choosing this alternative education. However, some of them also come from the right-wing milieu and choose Waldorf schools specifically due to their distance from the state and the associated opportunity to exert influence within the framework of self-administration.

Whether as a pedagogical alternative or as a projection surface for an “educated middle-class private school audience” (Martins, 2023b, p. 585): Waldorf education appears to be particularly attractive to an academic, post-materialistic, (left-wing) liberal, middle-class milieu who can afford it, including the resources it requires in view of the self-administration and (partial) financing. Their own associated lifestyle values are also reflected in their proximity to organic farming and nutrition and alternative medicine, making them predestined consumers of other anthroposophical fields of practice. This assumption even seems to apply across several continents:

Since the 2000s, Waldorf education has spread to countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This trend partly coincides with emerging middle classes (e.g. Johnson, 2014), who embrace new lifestyles (Van Leeuwen, 1996), including eco chic consumption patterns (Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014), interest in sustainability, social responsibility and spirituality (Boland, 2015, p. 194), and critical views on national education systems.

(van Schie, 2020, p. 74)

In a very similar vein, David Nikias (2014, p. 3) states that it was only thanks to the cultural, social, and economic capital of a certain cosmopolitan milieu that Waldorf educational ideas found their way to India: “Many young Indians have travelled or lived abroad and there has been a great influx of ideas and people from Europe, Australia, and America.” In the case of China, too, Waldorf and anthroposophical education is seen as an educated middle-class milieu (Zander, 2019, p. 55); Boland speaks similarly of “middle class, privileged” addressees in New Zealand (Boland, 2015, p. 195). This is also confirmed in Germany and the Netherlands (Ullrich, 2024, p. 39; van der Want et al., 2024, pp. 102–103), as well as in Spain and Poland (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 54; Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, pp. 66–67). It can be reasonably assumed that Waldorf parents worldwide tend to be middle-class and rely

heavily on cultural capital. It is no coincidence that their aspirations are attached to Waldorf education; after all, Waldorf is – according to Ansgar Martins (2023b, p. 585) –

Less progressive education than an experiential educational caricature of a humanistic grammar school: you probably don't learn Greek, but you certainly hear what the cunning of Odysseus has over the strength of Achilles, can recite the great ballads, have read Herder, Schiller or Humboldt, experience the true, the beautiful and the good aesthetically, scientifically and emotionally.

As Yifan Sun (2024, pp. 159, 161–162, 170) notes for the case of China, however, the critical factor for social mobility is spatial: "To some extent, in sending their children to Waldorf education, these parents, in a sense, were producing new forms of social differentiation and hierarchy," for which some of them have moved, undergone "personal transformations," and now indulge in a changed lifestyle. It can be assumed that there is a diffuse, common way of life that cannot be labelled as strictly anthroposophical but can be labelled as spiritual and that is at least linked to specific, alternative, humanistic, individualistic values, the desired actualisation of which is not limited to education alone but also shapes life and consumption decisions as a whole – which, however, remain disappointable and are therefore also disappointed (Hoffmann, 2024, p. 81; van der Want et al., 2024, p. 103). Israel Koren (2024, pp. 29, 44) speaks of a "metaphysical left" in view of these "drifters between the educational-religious islands of the blessed" (Martins, 2023b, p. 585), while in China individualism plays a greater role (Sun, 2024, p. 158). In Slovenia, anthroposophy itself seems to have a stronger influence on school choice (Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 150). If, as Zander (2019, p. 33) states, a distinction is to be made between those who are born into Waldorf education and those who choose anthroposophy, we can assume that the proportion of the latter is significantly higher in countries with a more recent Waldorf history than, for example, in the German-speaking centre of anthroposophy in Central Europe. It can be assumed that Waldorf education fills a spiritually charged cultural vacuum, which in Israel, for example, is particularly attractive to secular (i.e. also anthroposophical) middle-class parents in society and can be explained historically by the immigration of European Jews around the Second World War (Koren, 2024, pp. 27, 29–30). In Spain, a similar picture emerges: a progressive middle-class milieu tries to distance itself from Catholicism – and is then partly surprised by the esoteric foundations of Waldorf education, as Patricia Quiroga Uceda (2024, p. 55) reports.

Due to these requirements for a sometimes large financial and time commitment, Waldorf education – like public schools in general – can usually only be realised at the price of its exclusivity, which leads to decisive criticism in many places: in Japan, alternative schools are generally seen more as

an expression of neoliberal ideas, which counteracts the attempt to reduce inequality and introduce pupils to a democratic civil society. Heterogeneity and diversity are particularly invisible in them (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 11). The social selection caused by high school fees is also an issue in Israel (Koren, 2024, p. 38). DeForest (2011, p. 21) uses the example of Hungary to illustrate this by showing that the lack of afternoon care leads to the exclusion of working parents in the area of early childhood care. Joaquin Muñoz (2016, pp. 192, 194), in turn, speaks – with the US school reality in mind – of the cultural chapter necessary for successful participation in the Waldorf school enterprise and emphasises a potential intersectional entanglement of classism and racism:

The concerns of classism and racism go hand in hand, since often, though not always, low socio-economic level and minority status are often paired. Because of its private school standing, students in Waldorf schools are often privileged, white youth, for whom the larger systems of education and opportunity are already predisposed.

According to the available data and studies, the danger of elite education is therefore not just a problem of perception but an actual problem (see Taiwan as an example: Tang, 2010) – despite any Waldorf educational claim to the contrary.

However, the exclusivity and, in particular, the freedoms sought and realised also attract other Waldorf customers beyond the socio-cultural milieu just described. Ever since their beginnings and more recently – especially since the Covid-19 pandemic – to a greater and more widely received extent, Waldorf schools have also been frequented by neo-right-wingers, conspiracy theorists, etc., attracted by the considerable school autonomy and degree of self-administration, which they see as a possible place of activity far away from state supervision, allowing them to live out their ideology. Ansgar Martins (2024, p. 59), for example, speaks about anthroposophy which “consistently attracted the attention of völkisch activists and theorists”, which needs to be investigated further beyond the acknowledgement of individual cases.

#### **Fourth: Spirituality and the “*Überkulturellmenschheitliche*” as a Universal Anchorage**

Certain spiritual, pan-humanist ideas are proving to be a common denominator and universal anchor point for the acceptance and spread of Waldorf education throughout the world. The holistic view of the child and the human being as a whole offers a variety of starting points for a need for more, and consequently also for other spiritual to religious, and thus also ethnic, milieus (1), but this view also comes up against limits, for example, where questions of representation of the multireligious and multi-ethnic Waldorf community are concerned (2).

(1) Spirituality –in terms of both self-portrayal and external perception – appears to be one reason for the international propagation of Waldorf schools, their ability to connect to local contexts and thus for their successful expansion overall (for the example of China: Sun, 2024, p. 173). As Earl J. Ogletree (1998, p. 1) states in his *International Survey of the Status of Waldorf Schools*: “Seventy percent thought that Waldorf education influenced students to be open to the spiritual world and Anthroposophy.” This spiritual solidarity is the declared aim of Waldorf schools, placing the common good above national interests and thus simultaneously offering space for local cultures without abandoning them to modern civilisation and globalisation, as Atsuhiko Yoshida and Yoshiyuki Nagata (2024, p. 13), for example, describe in the case of Japan. Stefan Leber (1997, p. 8) also emphasises from the inside of Waldorf practice “the human creative power inherent in anthroposophy,” which looks at the human being with special consideration of what people from different cultural backgrounds (can) find in Waldorf education or anthroposophy in their search for “more.” Kung-Pei Tang (2010, p. 1) analyses ambivalences: “Due to the spiritually described image of man, the Waldorf educational approach is on the one hand ‘supra-cultural-human’ and on the other hand completely individual.” This spiritual world-view, which always remains somewhat vague, then allows connections to local, regional, and ethnic cultures. For example, Manya Oriell Kagan et al. (2024, pp. 94, 97) describe how the vagueness of the Waldorf spirit in Kenya proves to be compatible with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, with “shared humanness” representing the pivotal point between this and anthroposophy. In China – in addition to the integration of Chinese cultural elements into Waldorf education, which is assumed to be the recipe for success for the spread of Waldorf schools there (Cherry, 2019, p. 212) – it is the idea of the *Tao* as a universal or spiritual element of existence, to which anthroposophy complements and satisfies a need for spiritual forms of life (Sun, 2024, pp. 158, 168, 173). This also seems to apply to Māori. There are “parallels between their own cultural traditions and what they had learnt of anthroposophy.” Comments included that, in their view, Steiner education is “bringing the spirit [back] into the material world” and that “spirituality is the key to Māori pulling back from the edge,” a “lived spirituality” as a contrast to implicit or explicit “rejection of indigenous knowledge and language” (May 2003 as cited in Boland, 2015, p. 194). On the Indian subcontinent, it seems to be similarly true that “many aspects of Waldorf education [. . .] harmoniously resonate with Vedic traditions and the soul development of the human being” (Nikias, 2014, p. 2). This pattern of a spirituality that creates hope also works in Europe, as deForest (2011, p. 21) describes for the case of Hungary: “Waldorf Education offers an antidote to the troubled past and proves an opportunity to strengthen the cultural richness of these proud, courageous and passionate people.” Joaquin Muñoz (2016, p. 11) confirms this as an example for the US context:

Investigation into the philosophical tenets of Waldorf education and Native American/Indigenous epistemologies shows several examples of



overlap and similarity, the most striking being elements of spiritual belief and practice as foundational to Native American/Indigenous well-being, and the ability of Waldorf education to address this.

He also notes a similar localisation of the ego and the cosmos: “These two cosmologies may be presenting the same information in different forms and saying the same thing in different language and symbols” (Muñoz, 2016, p. 185). However, as with the other positive references to spirituality and the supra-humanity of anthroposophy, the question remains open as to whether they are the same or comparable, whether similarities can be found in the idea, the concept, or the matter. After all, there are also ambivalent effects of the reception of anthroposophical spirituality, as Thijs Jan van Schie (2020, p. 84) shows using the example of the Philippines:

The anthroposophical ideas of a spiritual world with spirits and angels coincided well with widespread Christianity in the Philippines. [. . .] On the other hand [. . .] a number of Filipino teachers, parents, and students struggled with the incorporation of anthroposophical spiritual ideas like karma and reincarnation into their Christian belief.

(2) Although religious ideas serve as an interface with anthroposophical thinking, they can act as a dividing line and thus have negative effects on the spread of Waldorf education. For example, in Kenya, where anthroposophical spirituality is “viewed as anti-Christian” and quasi-religious anthroposophical rituals and eurythmy are “often misinterpreted as devil worship” (Kagan et al., 2024, p. 107). Sometimes their spiritual dimension leads to “distrust and reticence,” as can also be seen in the examples of Spain and Poland due to the historical role of the Catholic Church as a monopolist in the field of education (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, pp. 47, 55; Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, p. 80). The claim to wholeness as a system of knowledge and meaning is also one that does not come without risks, as wholeness is “both a promise and a curse. Because the total is only a hands’ breadth away from the totalitarian.” (Zander, 2019, p. 34). This raises the question of interpretative sovereignty, which is discussed and problematised under specific circumstances, especially in an international context. For example, the expansion of Waldorf education and its spiritual norms in tension with the local culture can be understood as “spiritual colonialism” (see Boland, 2015, p. 193 with reference to Aengus Gordon), such as in the Philippines (van Schie, 2020, p. 84) or in China (Sun, 2024, pp. 168–169). This “field of tension between the general human and the specific cultural impulse” (Röh, 2019, p. 210) objectifies a certain fear of what Maja Dobiasz-Krysiak (2024, pp. 74–77), drawing on George Ritzer, describes as McDonaldisation: the import of esoteric Western ideas into Poland, which was shaped by real socialism, which – combined with universal or European values such as freedom and democracy – nevertheless fell on fertile ground. What appears to be a supposed adaptation

of Waldorf education to local cultures and identities sometimes turns out to be an eclectic, spiritually dominant teaching practice: “Because of the holistic aspirations of Waldorf education, certain interpretations of the world [. . .] and certain aesthetic preferences of Steiner [. . .] set the tone in the establishment of Taiwanese Waldorf schools,” resulting in a “neglect of the traditions of thought known in Taiwan,” a “discrepancy between aspiration and reality around the cultivation of indigenous culture [which] has advanced to become the guiding principle of curriculum construction since the educational reform movement” (Tang, 2010, pp. 141–142, 144). The diversity or adaptation so vehemently claimed by Waldorf educators is therefore not really realised but rather appears to be: “There is a ‘need to see brown faces among the teachers, parents and students’. Most strongly, the need to feel ‘culturally safe’ in the school environment is not always met” (Boland, 2015, p. 195).

### **Fifth: Anthroposophy: Achilles’ Heel of Waldorf Education?**

The discussion about Waldorf education takes place primarily in a pedagogical public sphere, whereby the role of Waldorf education in the respective educational system certainly influences its reception. The (professional) public debate and a large part of pedagogical-pragmatic research view Waldorf education – if at all – primarily *as an alternative pedagogy* and less as part of anthroposophy. However, this view has its limits, as Waldorf education can hardly be understood without anthroposophy (1). If anthroposophy is included in the consideration and evaluation, the view in academia and above all in the media debate – if it exists – changes, and in particular its unscientific nature and proximity to conspiracy theories and racism are criticised and sometimes ridiculed (2).<sup>4</sup> The way anthroposophists and Waldorf educators deal with criticism, on the other hand, tends to be reactive, often even aggressive (3).

(1) Of particular importance is the *pedagogical public sphere*,<sup>5</sup> which is made up of academia, (educational) policy, pedagogical practitioners of various provenances, as well as addressees and customers, and which has an impact beyond itself. In this educational public sphere, the Waldorf educational stakeholders themselves play an active and formative role, as in Germany (with its international endeavours such as the *International Waldorf Campus* and beyond), above all the *Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences* with

4 As is so often the case, there are also counter-examples to this trend. According to our case studies, these are Spain – where anthroposophy was initially of interest as a meditative practice not linked to religious institutions, and Waldorf education therefore only became known after the fact (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, pp. 55–56) – and Poland, where a very early development of an anthroposophical milieu can be observed (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, p. 66).

5 The categories of the public and science that we have created are heuristics that can be used to approach the reception and discussion of Waldorf education, which, strictly speaking, takes place in different public spheres.

its specific interpretation of anthroposophy and Waldorf education. The core of this self-portrayal is anthroposophy as a method and heuristic, not as content (Hoffmann, 2024, p. 77).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, a pragmatic discourse is taking place with increasing success: the establishment of anthroposophy-specific positions within the scientific community and its discussions. Empirical educational and social research in particular turn out to act as meeting points for Waldorf education and educational science with a positive reception in the public sphere, as can be seen in the graduate study by Heiner Barz und Dirk Randoll (2007) (Martins, 2024, p. 50). Anthroposophical teachings supposedly find no place among empirical data and figures. This raises the suspicion that the positive image of Waldorf education as an alternative education is largely due to a lack of knowledge about anthroposophy and their relationship to each other (for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 25; for Spain: Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 46). In turn, this reveals a traditional pattern in the public perception of Waldorf education: a *significant discrepancy* between reservations about anthroposophy or theory (in general: Staudenmaier, 2024, p. xii; for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 36; for Finland: Mansikka, 2024, pp. 179–180) and praise for the practice and thus even for the holistic-spiritual depth (Ullrich, 2024, p. 36). This is particularly evident in the course of the advancing academisation of teacher training, which simultaneously increases the degree of institutionalisation of Waldorf education, its openness to empirical research, especially in Germany (Ullrich, 2024, p. 38), and thus also its acceptance. In general, Waldorf education is usually not part of teacher training programmes (for France: Kolly, 2024, p. 112; for Slovenia: Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 150; for China: Sun, 2024, pp. 166–167), at most as an optional module (as in Austria and Spain: Geppert, 2024, pp. 155–156; Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 52). However, in Spain, for example, there is now a postgraduate degree at Spanish state universities with Waldorf education components (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 52), and other attempts to academise it and to legitimise it in professional and academic terms can be seen, for example, in Norway (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, pp. 115–116) and in the Netherlands (van der Want et al., 2024, p. 99).

Despite this increasing academisation and the fact that much research originates from Waldorf teacher training institutions (Buck & Hoffmann, 2024, pp. 2–3), research on Waldorf education as a whole can be described as scarce in general and ranges from almost no research, as in France (Kolly, 2024, p. 112) to little educational research, as is the case in Germany (Ullrich, 2024, p. 41), Norway (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, p. 113), Austria

6 Although this interpretation is prominently represented and underpinned by an impressively high publication activity, it is at the same time to be understood as an expression of a distancing from anthroposophy and its founder Rudolf Steiner (cf. *First: Expansion by self-uprooting?*), which is not yet hegemonic in the Waldorf community, as dissenting voices, e.g. at the *Goetheanum*, show (Zdražil, 2023a).

(Geppert, 2024, p. 157), and Finland (Mansikka, 2024, p. 176). Research on Waldorf education is most likely to be carried out by those who deal with reform pedagogy or holistic and alternative pedagogy, which then also represents the central context of the thematisation, as can be seen in the country studies on Germany (Ullrich, 2024, p. 27), Japan (Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 10), and Spain (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 50). Alternatively, research is carried out by anthroposophists themselves, such as in Germany (Hoffmann, 2024), Norway (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, pp. 117–118), Finland (Mansikka, 2024, p. 180) or Spain (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 51). It is noteworthy that even at Waldorf educational research institutions, research tends to be more general than on Waldorf educational topics, for example in Norway (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, p. 118). Overall, however, an increasing trend in research can be observed (in general: Staudenmaier, 2024, pp. xii–xiii; for Finland: Mansikka, 2024, pp. 181, 190; for Japan: Yoshida & Nagata, 2024, p. 8) and – at least in part – a differentiation of the debate (for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 43; for Spain: Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 49). Despite all the increasing trends and changes, the scientific community has tended to take note rather than engage in a committed debate, even though Waldorf education has successively taken its place in the world of scientific publications and conferences via empirical research since around the mid-2010s (for Germany: Hoffmann, 2024, pp. 71–78; for Norway: Stabel & Barkved, 2024, p. 118). However, this should be noted with the not insignificant caveat: “the topic primarily attracts the interest of researchers who already have a relationship with it” (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, p. 118).

Educational science and Waldorf education therefore seem to increasingly meet where a practical-empirical approach to the subject matter is concerned, away from ideological areas of conflict (e.g. in Spain: Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 51). Indications of this are the state-wise recognition of study programmes and degrees, for example in Germany (Hoffmann, 2024), or the establishment of chairs and study programmes in Waldorf education at state universities, as in the Netherlands (van der Want et al., 2024, p. 99). However, systematic cooperation in teacher training is difficult even there, as there is still no equivalence between Waldorf diplomas and university degrees (van der Want et al., 2024, p. 50). In Switzerland, the rather marginal role of private schools – and thus Waldorf schools – is preventing Waldorf schools from moving into the mainstream, as evidenced by falling pupil numbers and a simultaneous financial burden on parents. In addition, the Swiss education system is reform-oriented even in state schools; i.e. it integrates innovations and thus takes away the strongest argument in favour of “progressive education” schools (Oelkers, 2024, pp. 139–140). In the public school market, the role of Waldorf education varies greatly anyway. In the Netherlands, for example, there are repeated debates about whether Waldorf schools are methodological or ideological schools and how they should be dealt with (cf. van der Want et al., 2024, p. 107); in countries with a strict separation of church and state, such as the United States (Staudenmaier, 2024, p. xiii)

and France (Kolly, 2024), the religious character of Waldorf schools leads to problems of acceptance. In Austria and Spain, on the other hand, Waldorf schools are the largest form of public school alongside Catholic schools (Gepfert, 2024, p. 151; Quiroga Uceda, 2024, pp. 188–190); in Germany they are the largest player alongside denominational schools (Hoffmann, 2024; Ullrich, 2024); and in Finland they are the largest private reform school form of all (Mansikka, 2024). In the same country, Waldorf schools play a vitalising role for the education system from the perspective of the educational authorities, for example, in terms of educational values such as individualisation (Mansikka, 2024, p. 178) and are even institutionally integrated as participants in working groups for the “national educational curriculum work.” In addition, there is a reciprocal adaptation of ideas in the school and teacher training context but not in the academic field, where some movement is only slowly beginning to show (Mansikka, 2024, pp. 188–190). In Israel, too, it is precisely the integration into the public school system that has helped Waldorf schools to spread (Koren, 2024, p. 26) – contrary to the self-conceptions and external expectations of parents and teachers of Waldorf as an alternative education per se. In many other countries, however, Waldorf schools are primarily in “splendid isolation” from the rest of the education system (for Germany: Ullrich, 2024, p. 24).

In their reception of and engagement with Waldorf education, however, even pedagogues and educational scientists who have turned to it soon reach the limits of its normative underpinning or theoretical superstructure, i.e. anthroposophy. In organisational, didactic, and methodological terms, Waldorf education simply cannot be understood without it (Ullrich, 2024, p. 29); time and again it proves to be more than just a method. This clash between Waldorf education and educational science can be explained above all by different forms of knowledge and epistemological interests (Ullrich, 2024, p. 36), which even go so far as to lead to sceptical reactions to spiritually based ontology and anthropology beyond the pedagogical field (for Finland: Mansikka, 2024, pp. 179–181; for Slovenia: Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 146).

(2) If Waldorf education is regarded as part of anthroposophy, then this is accompanied by *increasing criticism*, which is particularly fuelled by the unscientific nature or inaccessibility of its esoteric superstructure on the one hand and by racism on the other. In Switzerland, for example, a cautious scepticism – not alarmism – towards anthroposophy is emerging (Oelkers, 2024, pp. 140–141), while in Norway the unscientific nature of anthroposophy as the philosophy behind Waldorf education is being more explicitly criticised in the media (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, pp. 113, 120, 129). The public reaction in the Spanish social media was quite remarkable when it became known that introductory courses in Waldorf education were being held at state universities. The main argument put forward there was that it was pseudo-scientific (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 53), although, in Spain, Waldorf education is generally under a sceptical gaze due to experiences with

Catholicism and the polarisation of religious and secular schools (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, p. 63). In Poland, too, there is a rather critical attitude towards spirituality on the part of the Catholic Church, which for its part has long and strongly influenced public and academic discourse. In the meantime, however, there tend to be less controversial media reports there (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, pp. 80, 88). In laïc France, a decidedly sceptical and cautious attitude towards sectarian activities prevails, which even brings the practice of Waldorf education into the sights of the public authorities (Kolly, 2024, p. 112); in Slovenia, the seclusion of anthroposophical practices and communities is the subject of public criticism (Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 149). These public reactions are further accentuated in the Chinese context, where anthroposophy is even stigmatised, leading to changes in the names of Waldorf schools erasing references to “Steiner” or “Waldorf” (Sun, 2024, p. 167).

In particular, the recurring question of the racism inherent in anthroposophy and thus also in Waldorf education becomes thematic at least at the level of practice, for example, in the references to Atlantis in epoch booklets and racist literature from anthroposophical authors in teacher handouts (Martins, 2023c, p. 66). But there are also different experiences and findings in the interpretation of Steiner’s writings (Muñoz, 2016, pp. 187–192). It was not until 2007 that anthroposophists first made perceptible attempts to distance themselves from at least some of Steiner’s statements (Martins, 2024, p. 58), although these efforts can only be assessed as ambiguous in their seriousness. In addition, the practice of Waldorf education – which prioritises form over content, implication over explication, mood over discourse – makes it difficult to engage in a differentiated and open debate about the structural dimension of racist thought patterns in anthroposophy and their implications for Waldorf education and other anthroposophical practices. Increased media attention and critical journalistic research are countered by singularisations, relativisations, and externalisations that can be strategically assumed (cf. in particular Martins, 2024, p. 62; 2023c), so that, although ‘individual cases’ accumulate, they do not lead to damage to the image of Waldorf education as a whole, which can be seen at least in our case studies for Germany (Martins, 2024, pp. 63, 66), the Netherlands (van der Want et al., 2024, pp. 103–104), Switzerland (Oelkers, 2024, p. 141), and Austria (Geppert, 2024, p. 169). A similar picture emerges in Israel: although the German debates about Steiner’s anti-Semitism and racism have reached the country, surprisingly they have not led to a deeper examination of them (Koren, 2024, pp. 32–33). Instead, the public discourse is dominated by other talking points and arguments – moral panic debates about “our children” (Martins, 2024, p. 47) are quickly conducted. In the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a temporary change in the public perception of Waldorf schools due to their sometimes open opposition to medically recommended and state-imposed hygiene measures, which subsequently led to growing and more critical reporting (for examples, see the case studies on Germany: Hoffmann, 2024, pp. 79–80 and Austria: Geppert, 2024, p. 166). The proximity of parts of Waldorf schooling

and its milieus to conspiracy theories has also been brought to the attention of the public through increased media discussion due to Covid-19. This can be seen, for example, in the case studies on the situation in Norway (Stabel & Barkved, 2024, pp. 123–124), Spain (Quiroga Uceda, 2024, pp. 48–49), Finland (Mansikka, 2024, p. 193), France (Kolly, 2024, p. 129), and Slovenia, where there were even state-ordered school closures (Berčnik & Rožman Krivec, 2024, p. 146). However, the critical debates are often characterised by the fact that they quickly drift into a mocking tone, which takes particularly illustrative features of Waldorf education (eurythmy, karma) as an opportunity to mock it and which thus corresponds in mode to heated attempts at defence on the affirmative side (cf. the Norwegian discourse as an example: Stabel & Barkved, 2024, pp. 119–120, 122).

(3) There is almost always a counter-movement to critical reporting, although this also varies in its orientation and intensity. On the part of anthroposophy, a predominantly reactive approach can be observed, alternating between defensive and openly aggressive stances. The criticism of Helmut Zander's opus magnum on anthroposophy is exemplary of the latter (Martins, 2024, p. 53). In some cases, legal action is even taken against critical publications, which reveals a rather special relationship of anthroposophy to public discourse, although in individual cases it is crowned with success (Martins, 2024, p. 64). There is what Peter Staudenmaier (2024, p. xii) calls a "significant gap between external perceptions and internal realities," which strongly suggests a hermetic practice of anthroposophy and thus also of Waldorf education. As polemical criticism of anthroposophy is sometimes voiced, it is undisputed that there are also a number of uncritical, dogmatic anthroposophists who feel compelled to defend their faith eloquently regardless of the arguments put forward and who quickly regard any criticism as an attack (for the viewpoint of those affected, see Schieren, 2015, p. 105). This criticism of criticism often takes the form of ad hominem attacks, as can be seen at least in the German debate (Hoffmann, 2024, p. 84) and – it can be assumed – is likely to have contributed to the hardening of fronts in public reception.

### **Six: Folklorisation of Waldorf Education**

In addition to the institutional framework, which is constituted by the respective education system on the one hand and the requirements of Waldorf schools on the other, as well as the anthroposophical ideas that are reflected in the latter, it is the *practices in particular* that make up the impression of what Waldorf education is. Alongside targeted efforts at renewal (1), it is above all these practices that give rise to a kind of second-order Waldorf education, a folkloristic variant of Steiner's ideas, which in turn characterises their further reception (2).

(1) It is unmistakable that in many places there are committed endeavours to renew Waldorf education. In many cases, reference is made to the



importance of the curriculum (Röh, 2019; Boland, 2015), with a particular focus on the subject of history and languages (Hoffmann, 2024, p. 84), which is no great surprise given Steiner's dictum of narration as super-didactic in the second septennial. At the same time, the diversity of methods and variance of practice in Waldorf schools is emphasised, which Ruhi Thyson (2021, p. 82) sums up with the formula: *One pedagogy – many practices: variations on formal and enacted curricula in Steiner/Waldorf schools*. The *18 generative principles of Steiner education* by Rawson (2021) in turn focus more on the evaluation of existing practices and the generation of new practices in addition to Steiner's ideas, combined in each case with requirements for the teachers, such as “taking the spiritual dimension seriously (#1); a particular form of block teaching (#7); artistic teaching (#11); and the responsibility of the teachers themselves for the educational leadership of the school (#16).” (Boland & Rohde, 2022, p. 25). It can therefore be assumed that Waldorf practice and its reflection are not concerned with a definition of its core but that the presumed folklorisation takes place in its sense. This is also helped by the fact that the characteristics described in each case are kept very general – such as the eight elements of Waldorf education in the Netherlands, including “phases of child development,” “curriculum,” and “teacher's autonomy” (van der Want et al., 2024, p. 107). Such generalisations lend themselves as projection surfaces in which the basic ideas of Steiner's anthroposophy blur with the experience of Waldorf practitioners and parental expectations. This gives rise to images of Waldorf education such as the “22 myths about Waldorf Education” identified by Steve Sagarin (2017), which in this case are now commonly believed to be just myths (Rawson, 2021, p. 192) but are not always recognisable as such. A folklorisation of ideas and practices that supposedly go back to Rudolf Steiner lends them a certain authority but inevitably, especially in an international and intercultural context, leads to problems and breaks with the predominantly European traditions of thought that are also present in the perpetual Waldorf curriculum. The one-sided resolution of this conflict then sometimes leads to what Neil Boland (2015, p. 195) describes as being “unquestioning, over-reliant on tradition.” This can be observed in Taiwan, for example, when Kung-Pei Tan (2010, pp. 29–30) reports that there is a veritable fixation on the theory of cultural epochs and the threefold structure among teachers. Or when Ansgar Martins (2024, pp. 50–51) attests to a “rigid adherence to once-established practices,” in the German Waldorf scene, which favours school rituals and a folklorisation with internationally popular recognition features that can also persist independently of anthroposophy. Thus a religious sound of Waldorf practice remains, but it is skilfully recast both subjectively and collectively. This “Waldorf mimicry” as an association with a wide variety of values also functioned very successfully, as the example of Poland shows, in adapting to the democratic spirit of optimism after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Dobiasz-Krysiak, 2024, p. 77).

The harmonious aesthetics of the schools, their festivals and games, and the resulting recognition value also seem to be enormously important for

external image (Ullrich, 2024, p. 27). At the same time, the ritualised, rhythmic practice of Waldorf education helps to acquire future addressees: the “end-of-term performances in anthroposophic schools serve as shop windows” (Koren, 2024, p. 36). It can be assumed that Waldorf education, very much like Montessori education, has established itself as a brand with its own aesthetics, high recognition value, and its own unique selling points, which at the same time strives to square the circle by distancing itself from its originator Rudolf Steiner. The latter can probably be observed most prominently and at the same time most profoundly in the handling of the brand name itself and “the shift from ‘Steiner schools’ to ‘Waldorf schools’”<sup>7</sup> that has recently taken place, for example, in the United Kingdom. Against this background, what Maja Dobiasz-Krysiak (2024, p. 86) describes through the example of Poland appears to be as generalisable as it is indicative of an increasing folklorisation of Waldorf education:

The school is commonly called ‘Waldorf’, which functions as a colloquial abbreviation, but also implies the frequent direction of the Waldorf drift – on the one hand, from anthroposophy to secular school organisation, on the other hand – leaving from Steiner’s social concepts, based on Social Threefolding, assuming the cooperation of parents, teachers, and the school board, to a school subjected to market mechanisms, based on a profit-oriented business model.

### **Concluding Words**

It does not seem possible to speak credibly and in a scientifically sound manner of a unified Waldorf education, either synchronously or diachronically. As our contributors in these two volumes have shown, and as further sources confirm, many variations of Waldorf education can be traced back to Steiner’s teachings, sometimes more, sometimes less. What is an exciting case from a scientific point of view (as Klaus Prange puts it: Waldorf education is as interesting for educational science as pathology is for medicine) becomes a problem at the latest when the public, just like potential Waldorf parents, wonders what Waldorf education is all about, whether it is right for their own child, and, if so, whether it should legitimately be part of public education – and, if so, under what conditions.

The variation in practice is intertwined with other factors that make it difficult or even impossible to gain a low-threshold insight into what is happening.

7 Waldorf UK (2023): What is Waldorf UK. *Waldorf Education UK*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231122122459/https://waldorfeducation.uk/about/what-is-waldorf-uk> (memento from 11 November 2023). This quote by Peter Staudenmaier is drawn from <https://groups.io/g/waldorf-critics/message/33623>, a mailing list dedicated to the critique of Waldorf education worldwide (cf. Buck & Hoffmann, 2024, p. 15).

The esoteric character of Waldorf education requires at least two different registers of communication, as its founder himself stated and practised,<sup>8</sup> with insiders and outsiders (cf. Zdražil, 2023b). To the outside world, dubious, esoteric, anthroposophical elements of Waldorf practice (such as the diagnosis of pupils' temperaments *before* they start school in order to balance the class group and organise seating arrangements) are disguised or given a positive connotation by using generalisations about reform education – for example, as “child-centred pedagogy,” without having to be embarrassed to name what constitutes the child in anthroposophical anthropology.

Thanks to the painstaking research of numerous academics (from diverse fields such as theology, history, sociology, and education), the *patterns, players, and perspectives* of this specific form of education have been increasingly addressed and criticised in recent years without having to provide a direct answer as to what Waldorf education is at its core. From a radically pragmatic point of view, the question can be asked as to what is more important in the evaluation of Waldorf practice from the outside: the pursuit of higher knowledge in the metaphysical sense or its practical success, which can undoubtedly be proven by the increasing number of schools, pupils, etc. From the inside, however, in anthroposophical terms, this question is not a trivial one (Zander, 2019, p. 9), because it potentially exposes the historical core of anthroposophical thought to popularisation and thus the hollowing of its core idea. This conflict is ignited in a recurring manner by recent, high-profile, sometimes even scandalous incidents.

Scholars are in the comfortable position of being able to leave this question open for the time being and to trace *how* Waldorf education appears in different places and at different times. The 16 case studies on 14 countries and their synthesis in the form of the six patterns of reception compiled here are in any case a first attempt at systematic, internationally comparative, and equally historically informed Waldorf research, which at the same time corresponds to the internationality of the practice of its subject.<sup>9</sup> In our opinion,

8 At the example of his theory of temperaments, Steiner answers on the occasion of the first teacher class at Stuttgart Waldorf school, 26 August 1919, to a future teacher's question whether pupils are to be introduced to the concept: “That's what you have to keep behind the scenes. It is very important that the teacher tactfully knows what to do behind the scenes. Everything that we are discussing here is there to give the teacher authority. If he were to reveal himself, he would not succeed.” (Steiner, 1984, p. 55). In a very similar manner, this attitude is iterated via official channels. Since social media, among other things, make it increasingly difficult today to communicate in a way that is appropriate to the target audience, i.e. to distinguish between the general public and Waldorf teachers, Thomas Zdražil (2023b) argues in favour of an even more cautious implementation of Steiner's communication maxim: “In public presentations [. . .] one must articulate oneself with the help of common terminology and within the everyday thematic horizon of current issues and actually largely dispense with in-depth anthroposophical content in the narrower sense. No questions should be answered that have not been asked.”

9 Last but not least, the inclusion of a total of 28 authors from educational practice and (educational) research reflects, on the one hand, the need for precisely this diverse and

the next necessary step would be to research the lived practice on whether the differences exposed in this project can also be consistently demonstrated in ethnographic-empirical terms. This would be a promising way to approximately answer the ontological question of what Waldorf education *is*. Any Waldorf education without Steiner and anthroposophy would be difficult to describe as such because it would be stripped of its meaningful content: neither school enrolment at the age of 7, nor the didactic peculiarities of storytelling in the second septennial, nor the renunciation of textbooks, the seating arrangement according to pupils' temperaments, the rhythmisation of the school year, and the epochal lessons, eurythmy, or other practices would have a *raison d'être* that could be derived or legitimised pedagogically. These elements draw their persuasive power from the belief in Rudolf Steiner's higher insight as well as from their long tradition and the folklore that feeds on it. A radical renunciation (beyond the renaming of schools and associations) would be tantamount to Oedipal patricide. And, in these practices, it may be possible to find more substantial answers to the persistence of a pedagogy with which many Waldorf parents and teachers can readily and clearly identify, which does not seem to apply to the same extent to the ideological basis of anthroposophy.<sup>10</sup>

In short, it is not enough to ask directly about the “dangers” and “advantages” and to derive the answers from the theoretical superstructure of Steiner's œuvre and the wider anthroposophical canon or from comparative competence studies or anecdotal evidence alone. Instead, it would be much more informative to ask about (empirically sound) patterns of reception, legitimation, and communication strategies and, not least, the actions and practices themselves that are inherent to this pedagogy as phenomena, as well as to always analyse these in the mode of immanent criticism against the background of their own claims. This, we suspect, offers the opportunity to trace the hitherto unknown paths of the practices and to pave the way for a phenomenological and at the same time ideologically critical approach to the practice of Waldorf education.<sup>11</sup>

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international expertise in order to do justice to the complexity and heterogeneity of the phenomenon and, on the other hand, the need for more plurality in international Waldorf research and the establishment of a corresponding research community in general.

10 Furthermore, a socio-historical comparison of Waldorf educations' field of practice with that of anthroposophical agriculture and medicine would be informative in order to determine the relationship between a practice that may be emancipating itself or even secularising itself from its ideological superstructure.

11 Similar to the beginning of the first book, we would like to conclude this one with a heartfelt expression of thanks to all those who made this possible. First and foremost, our sincere thanks go to our contributors, who have shown impressive patience and maintained a constructive dialog with us for almost two years. We would also like to thank Michael Olbrich and Fiona Hollmann (both *FernUniversität in Hagen*) for the careful formal revision of the manuscript and Andreas Halvorsen Lødemel (*Universitetet i Tromsø*) for the fine-tuning of the wording in this final chapter. Last, but not least we would like to thank Kanishka Jangir and AnnaMary Goodall for their wonderful guidance at *Routledge*.

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