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8 Waldorf Education in Finland

Soft Alternative, Adaptation, and a Life in Suspicion

Jan-Erik Mansikka

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Waldorf as an Independent School Within the Finnish Context

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

> [a]n authorisation may be granted to provide education by the medium of a foreign language, special-needs education, education according to a particular ideology or education for students other than children of compulsory school age on the grounds of regional or national educational and cultural needs.
>
> (Law 628/1998, §7.1)

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

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

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

1 The education provider for alternative education must describe the following aspects of what the local curriculum is based on (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 159):
   (a) Based on a particular philosophical system
      - What are the perspectives of a particular philosophical system based on, and how do they complement the underlying values, objectives, and key contents of a basic education?
      - How do these perspectives manifest themselves in the school culture and working approaches?
      - How does the education emphasise the values, knowledge, skills, and capabilities based on this philosophy, and how are they implemented in a cross-cutting manner in the instruction of various subjects and learning modules?
   (b) Based on a particular pedagogical system
      - What are the pedagogical principles and solutions of the particular pedagogical system based on, and how do they complement the pedagogical policies of basic education as specified in this core curriculum?
      - How are these principles and solutions reflected in the school culture and working approaches and in the instruction of various subjects and learning modules?

2 It is rather difficult to provide an exact number because of the different types of schools. Finland has an association for independent schools consisting of 56 member schools. Its objective is "to promote the cooperation between school managements and teacher colleagues in

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

The first Waldorf school in Finland opened in Helsinki in 1955.[5] The date was rather late from a Nordic perspective, with a Waldorf school being founded in Oslo in 1926 and in Stockholm in 1931 (Göbel, 2020). Due to the increasing number of studies on progressive education in the Nordic countries in the first half of the 20th century, the pedagogical ideal of a more child-centred education also spread to Finland. The Waldorf school in Helsinki, as a pedagogical alternative to the state schools, also appeared at a time when Finland had started to plan a massive reform in education, in line with the unified educational system then being implemented in Sweden, namely a free nine-year comprehensive school for all pupils. A new Act was finally passed in by the Finnish government in 1968, after a long and winding process (Ahonen, 2012). Despite a strong tendency to standardise all schools providing basic education, Waldorf schools survived and were well-received in their first decades in Finland. In some cases, educational authorities saw them as having a vitalising role in terms of school development, supporting some of the pedagogical values behind the planned educational reforms, most notably the emphasis on individualisation (see Paalasmaa, 2011a; Pärssinen, 2014).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discourses on Waldorf Education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> The risk is that independent schools with a particular educational philosophy (for example, Waldorf education) are anti-individualistic and not at all adapted to the individual pupil. They are anti-individualistic because they do not maintain the necessary free space as a guarantee of the independent formation of free will in the young person. Independent schools tend to function in a normatively socialised way, and they often become an extension of the existing values in homes or in a particular ethnic or religious group. The risk of indoctrination is obvious.
>
> (Uljens, 2006, p. 15, originally in Swedish, translated by the author)

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Empirical Framework: Interviews

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

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

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

Table 8.1 Informants participating in the study.

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

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

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

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

Findings

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

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

Pedagogical Alternatives With Soft Values

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adaptation on Different Levels

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An Educational Life in Suspicion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> I really don't think Waldorf schools constitute a religious sect. They are two different things, anthroposophy and Waldorf education, even if both are connected to Rudolf Steiner. When it comes to learning, I like the system present in Waldorf schools more, the holistic approach to education . . . I dare not say that you learn better in a Waldorf school, but you learn in another way, and that was a way I [as a parent] appreciated very much.
>
> (E)

As was mentioned earlier, few families today choose Waldorf schools because of their specific philosophical background. While many potential Waldorf parents might find anthroposophy more off-putting than attractive, it is more the alternative educational practice that is of interest to them. Anthroposophy does not have to be a problem for Waldorf parents so long as it remains only in the background and does not conflict with the more common basic educational values. According to the interviews, the role of anthroposophy in

Waldorf schools in Finland is, overall, not very strong, which is in line with the process of adaptation and integration. This was also how a university teacher conceived of the role of anthroposophy in Waldorf education while still allowing for the possibility of excesses:

> My interpretation is that Finnish Waldorf has a rather wide scope and, in that way, leaves quite a lot of space for teachers to operate. I have never met any "Waldorf fundamentalists", but I am sure there are some, and was there not some kind of excess somewhere? At least when it comes to vaccines, there was something in Lohja . . .
>
> (D)

The informant was referring to an incident from 2014, where the pupils in one Waldorf school were exposed to measles, and it turned out that about 50% of the pupils in the school had not been vaccinated against it (MPR vaccine).[14] The previously mentioned quote indicates an instance of negative publicity in media directed at Waldorf schools, in which they appeared as isolated school communities with strong ideological or even conspiratorial values. Another recent case was a Swedish TV series about a rather radical Waldorf school in Sweden, also shown on Finnish TV. Rather surprisingly, it did not generate any kind of public debate in Finland.[15] Neither did the Covid-19 crisis result in any negative publicity for Waldorf schools. However, despite the absence of any recent public attacks on Waldorf schools in Finland, they still face suspicion from different directions. This point was noted by the informant from the *National Board of Education*:

> There is a form of suspicion against them, as in "What kind of fuss is this?", which I do not see in the same way against Christian schools, and they are not as organised as Waldorf schools. It is quite interesting, this suspicion, considering that they have been in Finland [since 1955].
>
> (F)

People's attitudes regarding alternative educational movements vary depending on where in the country they live. If a Waldorf school has existed in the municipality for some time, it might become a part of the local culture and

14 More than 90% of people in Finland have received the MPR vaccine: see Myllyniemi (2014, January 24). Lapsia ei rokotettu – erittäin tarttuva tauti iski kyläkouluun. Ilta-Sanomat. https://web.archive.org/web/20230801145414/www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000000707472.html (memento from 2023, August 1).

15 The television series *De utvalda barnen* [The chosen children] (2019) gave rise to a large public debate in Sweden. In Finland, it was shown by the public broadcasting company YLE: https://web.archive.org/web/20230801145636/https://areena.yle.fi/1-50857759 (memento from 2023, August 1).

an acceptable alternative. In other places, the suspicion might run quite deep, as expressed in this quote:

> Not very many have a clue about what is going on in a Waldorf school. For the most part, when I mention, as a parent, that my children are or have been in Waldorf schools, people are first quiet, and then you can read from their faces that "okay, this is some kind of nutty [*hörhö*] school" . . . and I always have to explain to them about it, yes, there are really strong prejudices.
>
> (E)

Conclusions

Finland has a reputation for strong public education. It has become part of Finland's brand and even a source of national pride. From a political standpoint, there is rather little polarisation between opposing positions concerning education and a certain consensus about the direction of educational development. This study has demonstrated that Finnish educational policy allows for considerable educational variation to the pervasive comprehensive school model. Waldorf schools are the most widespread and best-known examples of alternative education movements in Finland. However, neither public discussions nor academic research have paid much attention to independent schools or alternative education, partly because of the small number of schools.

Waldorf schools represent a soft and holistic alternative to mainstream education. In Finland, they have a somewhat good reputation as a pedagogical alternative, with teaching methods and a view on learning that enriches the pedagogical field. The positive reputation stems in part from the fact that Waldorf teachers participate in curriculum-building working groups on a national level, which for the Waldorf movement is a strong signal of integration within the educational system and approval of its pedagogy. At the same time, several people are suspicious of Waldorf schools because of their anthroposophical underpinnings. The informants could not mention offhand particular groups that might be either for or against Waldorf education in society, but suspicions do emerge in different situations nonetheless. It seemed more a matter of people's personal views than a prejudice or conception that operates at a group level.

The rather stable position that Waldorf schools have achieved in Finland is maintained through their active communication and collaboration with the *National Board of Education*. Waldorf schools have adapted to the national core curriculum and have a quite pragmatic view of their own pedagogy. Despite their well-integrated position within society, the number of pupils entering Waldorf schools is slightly decreasing.[16] In the interviews, there was

16 During the period of 2000–2021, the number of pupils in Finnish Waldorf schools (grade 1–9) increased between 2000–2011 and has been slightly decreasing since. There were 3,696 pupils in 2000, 4,104 pupils in 2011, and 3,642 pupils in 2021 (see Pale, 2023)

much talk from within the movement about the need to develop Waldorf education further and its role within society in the future. There is a trend in Waldorf schools of playing down the tradition and being open to new research and developments in education, but without losing their own identity. The recent curriculum changes in basic education have transformed the Finnish comprehensive school system, with more of a focus on student participation, the integration of different subjects, and an emphasis on phenomena-based learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). An interesting question is how this development in mainstream education has affected the public view of Waldorf education as a pedagogical alternative.

Finally, the challenge seemingly faced by Waldorf schools in Finland could be described as a certain tension: without adapting and changing with the times, their alternative becomes out of date. By adapting too much, though, they risk losing the originality of offering an alternative way of learning. One of the Waldorf teachers pointed out in the interview that, seen from Central Europe, the Finnish Waldorf schools are not conceived as "real Waldorf schools" but more like schools "inspired by Waldorf". For this informant, it is one thing to be "well received in the educational system" but quite another to adequately address the question of "How do we keep our pedagogy alive, as an own Waldorf pedagogy?" (C).

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