

## **The globalisation of Steiner education: Some considerations**

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**ABSTRACT.** Steiner early childhood centres and schools span the globe and are attended by thousands of children in contexts and settings far removed from that of the first school in Southern Germany. This article attempts to assess how the education has spread into new locations and cultures, and the degree to which it has, or has not, adapted to different geographical and social environments. Reporting on a small study undertaken with Māori in New Zealand, all former students who had specialised in Steiner education, I explore some of the issues identified and gauge if they have wider relevance to the school movement. Lastly, I take the concept of audits introduced by Aengus Gordon and suggest how audits of time, of place and of community may serve to gain an informed understanding of how the curriculum, both acknowledged and hidden, manifests in different contexts and settings.

*Keywords:* Diversity, globalisation, localisation, Indigenous, hidden curriculum, New Zealand

### **Background**

Since the first school was founded ninety-six years ago, Steiner education has moved well beyond its European roots into evermore-diverse settings. Children in Peru, Namibia, Tajikistan and the Australian outback are all being educated in Steiner schools (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners, 2014). In China, new centres are opening weekly (Cherry, 2014; James, 2014). At the same time, classrooms in Europe are themselves becoming significantly more diverse (European Commission, 2011). The first inter-cultural Waldorf School was established in Germany in 2010; there are Steiner initiatives in North and South America, in New Zealand and Australia begun by and for Indigenous peoples. Given the increase in numbers of refugees worldwide, including those seeking to live in Europe, diversity in classrooms is set only to increase. I write as a New Zealander based in Auckland. New Zealand is a bi-cultural country (Māori and European); though contested, diversity is treated as the norm. The rapidly changing ethnic composition of society in Auckland has led to it being acknowledged as 'super-diverse,' the second-most diverse city in the world after Toronto with over 40% of the inhabitants born overseas, 11% identifying as Māori and 15% as Pacific peoples. I believe questions relevant in New Zealand as to how or whether Steiner education adapts to non-European geographic, cultural and societal settings may have currency in other countries. The aim of this article is to stimulate critique of how current practices and traditional 'Waldorf' values and assumptions manifest in settings of diversity and what alternatives may look like, with a hope that Steiner schools worldwide will seek to further respect and embody the geographic, social, and cultural diversity of their settings and surroundings.

### **Contrasting points of view**

There are numerous instances of Steiner education being criticised for being self-referential and not moving with the times. To Bast, "there is much within Waldorf education ... which is hermetically closed to

things other than ‘Steinerish’ thoughts and processes,” it is a “normative education” and to a degree “even fundamentalist” in its disinclination to critique its founder (quoted in Frielingsdorf, 2012, p. 111). Ullrich calls it “self-institutionalising” and the pedagogy as “antiquated” (Ullrich, 2008, p. 167 & 165), while acknowledging that the approach is in many ways successful. Speaking out of her experience of Waldorf schools in the United States and Brazil, da Souza comments that the Waldorf curriculum “privileges a certain body of knowledge (it is visibly Eurocentric) and neglects important cultural, economical, and political issues” (2012).

For a number of years, teachers and academics working within or who are connected to Steiner school communities on different continents have begun to draw attention to the fact that, despite its outer ‘success’ in being adopted in an increasing number of countries, there are specific issues around the contextualisation and localisation of Steiner education and, specifically, how it manifests in non-European contexts. In the United States, Vernon Dewey has reported on the lack of racial diversity among teaching staff in Waldorf schools (2012). Christof Wiechert and Steve Sagarin among others have sought to expose ‘Waldorf myths,’ and highlight a tendency for Steiner teachers to replicate practices uncritically which have become traditional within the school movement with the presumption that they are authentic and in line with pedagogical indications given by Steiner (Sagarin, 2003, 2008, 2014; Wiechert, 2014). Though it has been claimed within the movement that “for some time Waldorf education has ceased being a Eurocentric education movement” (Kullak-Ublick, 2012), de Souza’s comments above indicate that established European or Eurocentric traditions still play an over-large part in pedagogical practice in Steiner settings, at odds with their widening geographic and cultural diversity. This is recognised by Roberto Trostli in his authoritative introduction to education lectures by Steiner (2011).

Ida Oberman wrote in 2008 that “normative constructs” within the Steiner curriculum (p. 13) limit processes of adaptation to local cultural contexts. “The curriculum remains remarkably unchanged, even under the last decade’s pressures to disavow Eurocentrism...even in inner-city Milwaukee, the Waldorf teachers continue to tell the Norse myth of Odin and Thor” (2008, p. 13). This opinion echoes criticisms both within and without the movement (see Wiechert and Frielingsdorf), the unquestioning continuation of past curricular and pedagogical models.

The same is taken up by Rawson who highlights the overall lack of criticality and reflection when Steiner schools are established in different cultures and contexts:

Waldorf education is being offered in more than 60 countries and is growing rapidly with major new areas of development in Asia. In the process of becoming global, it has spread from its origins in Europe, yet it has barely begun to reflect critically on what this expansion means in terms of the transmission of ideas into different cultures and different settings (2010, p. 2)

Aengus Gordon puts this expansion in stronger terms, questioning whether it is a form of colonisation, establishing settler outposts overseas to bring civilising influences to those in need of them.

There are many different levels of colonialism, and not only the economic model but also the spiritual mode, and it would be imperative in any school right now, in my view, to actually do its own audit of the time and place (Aengus Gordon, quoted in Houghton, 2012, p. 70)

This is discussed further below, as is the concept of audits.

On the other side, acknowledgement that Steiner education will and should look different in each location appears to be growing. The International Forum of Steiner/Waldorf Education, the international body of the Waldorf education movement, recently stated in an article,

... in taking up the indications Rudolf Steiner gave for teaching, which for example draw more on western cultural values, these will need to be supplemented or replaced with correspondingly valuable content, provided the pedagogical effect is thereby preserved.

The curriculum ... is developed depending on geographical and cultural position, time-related and political development as well as general or global lines of development [sic]. Each school is located in a cultural, geographical and political space. ... Each region and country has its history, which characterises world history

from its own vantage point and will also have its effect on the curriculum. (International Forum for Steiner/Waldorf Education, 2015, p. 14) (Author's emphasis)

It must be fully acknowledged that there are many teachers and schools who are undertaking valuable work to localise the Steiner curriculum and teaching for their individual situations. This takes many forms. In China, a link between Steiner education and traditional Confucian values has been developed (Cherry, 2014); in New Zealand, an extensive Māori curriculum for classes 1-12 has been established and mapped onto the standard Steiner curriculum (Taikura Rudolf Steiner School, 2015). These are all positive steps.

## Cultural inclusion

In 2013, I undertook a small study in New Zealand with a number of ex-students who identify as Māori, Indigenous New Zealanders and who were working in Steiner schools or early childhood settings or who were parents of children in Steiner schools. All had studied Steiner education at university and were qualified teachers. The majority are fluent Māori language speakers. I include aspects of the study here in brief because I believe some responses may serve to cast light on the experiences and thoughts of non-majority groups in other settings who have yet to be asked their perceptions of Steiner education and the taught curriculum.

Acknowledging the work of Penetito (2010), Marsden (2003), Durie (2003) and Kincheloe (1999) among others, the study aimed to let the voices of Indigenous teachers from Aotearoa New Zealand be heard as they detailed their engagement with Steiner education, to explore what drew them to it and what they see as the commonalities and differences between their own cultural traditions and what they have learned and experienced of Steiner education and anthroposophy themselves.

For methodology, participants were invited to take part in one-to-one conversations. This was chosen as a traditional Māori form of dialogue, *kanohi kitea* (Pipi, 2004; Smith, 2001), a face-to-face meeting; it gives the interviewer a recognised face and acknowledges the interpersonal quality of the research. The conversations were recorded and then transcribed.

The concept of the project was originally suggested by the participants. The conversations were initiated by the researcher (the author). The aim was to look for common themes and statements with no preconceived ideas of what these might be. Similarities and differences were equally welcome. There were no set questions beyond the first, *'What attracted you initially to Steiner education?'* The conversation was led by the participants, exploring similarities, differences, nuances and concerns as they emerged during the discussion.

The participants made many comments about parallels between their own cultural traditions and what they had learned 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." All participants observed that Steiner centres and schools offer a "lived spirituality" and the education has a deep connection to the natural world and ecological values. They all mentioned that, in their view, this "lived spirituality" is stronger in Steiner education than other education movements, including *kura kaupapa Māori*<sup>1</sup> (cf. Stewart, 2012). One participant stated that, in their view, Māori culture and anthroposophy walk side by side, "in tandem," "not the same, but travelling in the same direction," and that in Steiner education there is "a breadth of thought, a bringing together of many streams which can appeal not only to the west."

These comments are of potential interest as there is a wealth of evidence from many countries which supports May's view that "schooling has been explicitly and implicitly a site of rejection of indigenous knowledge and language" (2003, p. 143), that it is "vital that this be redressed by putting the community and culture at the centre of the school initiative" (Bishop, 2010, p. 65). Initiatives seeking to combine aspects of Waldorf pedagogy and Indigenous knowledges include the Latoka Waldorf School in South Dakota, the Kusi Kawsay School in Peru, and the Everlasting Tree School and Douglas Cardinal Foundation for Indigenous Waldorf Education in Canada.

1. *Kura kaupapa Māori* are Māori-language immersion schools, run by and for Māori. They are found throughout New Zealand

At the same time, the participants gave strong critique and valuable insight as to views of Māori experiencing Steiner education in New Zealand. I stress that these are people who have all studied Steiner education and anthroposophy, and who have worked in or send their children to Steiner schools.

Illustrative statements included that [for Māori, Steiner schools] "... could be good, but perceptions of the schools keep many away." "People [Māori] understand the spiritual aspect but won't go [to the schools] if they don't see their culture reflected." 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.

Though this is reflected clearly in 'non-Steiner' literature (Hingangaroa Smith, 2012; Smith, 2001), I am not aware that the aspect of ensuring cultural safety for students and families has been discussed in the context of Steiner schools. When asked what 'cultural safety' might include, answers encompassed that cultural values would be clearly respected and promoted through the choice of languages taught, should be present in every subject, through the arts, in science, in history (especially), the story of the land, the choice of poems, pictures on the wall, fables, myths, biographies and so on. These comments again reflect mainstream literature in the area of education for social justice, acknowledgement of the diverse cultures, world conceptions, beliefs, and viewpoints which can be present in the classroom and school community (Kumashiro, 2015). This has not yet been widely debated in the Steiner educational community to date.

## Critique

Finally, the participants of this small study spoke about their perceptions of the values and attitudes of the Steiner communities with which they were familiar. They were at pains to emphasise that this was not a criticism of Steiner education as such or of anthroposophy but more of observations of individuals with human failings. There are of course at least as many exceptions to all of these comments as there are instances.

In list format, qualities mentioned which had been encountered were that individuals could appear:

- mono-cultural
- Eurocentric
- middle class, privileged
- unquestioning, over-reliant on tradition
- disinterested in others with no real impulse to understand
- more interested in distributing knowledge than in learning from others
- unconsciously arrogant
- "guardians of the truth"
- able to be plural and diverse, but hold themselves back

## Steiner education and decolonisation?

This led to interesting conversations about how the participants experienced that Steiner education has developed since it was introduced to New Zealand from Europe some 65 years ago. Has it adapted smoothly and appropriately to local surroundings and peoples or has it more sought to bring with it 'foreign' values to a new land and to what degree is this suitable? It is not an easy question to address. To a degree it reflects the history of the modern country of New Zealand.

Is it time to speak of the need to de-colonise Steiner education? In New Zealand, colonisation and decolonisation are terms which have emotional power. I write from a country with a contested history of colonisation by Europeans and which is striving to become a post-colonial one, challenging and destabilising

the dominance of pākehā (European) thought and privilege. Gordon (above) talks of ‘spiritual colonisation’ in the context of Waldorf education; this is a discourse which is beyond the scope of this article to unpack.

I have worked with the feedback from this small study over the last two years. It was for me informative and has led to many conversations in many countries. I designed and ran a post-graduate university course for practising Steiner teachers called *Steiner Education in Aotearoa New Zealand* to see if I could deepen awareness and understanding of the issue amongst colleagues; at the same time it provided me with rich opportunity to learn from others. Since then, there has been a reassessment and strengthening of the status and visibility of Māori language and Māori tikanga [customs] in the schools and in the curriculum. It should not be imagined that these were not already present in New Zealand Steiner schools. Working in a bicultural educational setting, Māori language and traditions are found in every school including strongly in Steiner schools. The school which hosted the course has become a restorative justice school, possibly the first Steiner school to take this approach. The proportion of Māori students in New Zealand Steiner schools ranges from 2% to 30%; this could be a sign that Māori culture is perceived as being more strongly valued and represented than hitherto.

## Transferability

This study was undertaken with a group of Māori on the shores of the South Pacific Ocean. It can be argued that their experiences are only of local interest and relevant only in the isolated New Zealand context. However, it may be of value for schools and communities to look at their own situations, identify non-majority groups and assess the degree to which their viewpoints, histories, culture and customs are present in the classroom. The questions are undoubtedly relevant to minority groups in New Zealand who are not Māori. The diversity which is taken for granted in Auckland is becoming more the case in other locations. Within the Waldorf curriculum, are some attitudes and values privileged above others (as de Souza asserts above) and has this been a conscious decision?

The ‘hidden curriculum’ is a term coined by Benson Snyder in his book of the same name (1970). It has come to refer to the values, norms, attitudes and beliefs unconsciously transmitted within the classroom and the school environment. It is not to be found detailed within a curriculum document or in lesson plans but forms a significant aspect of learning in every school. It is not possible to avoid it. Within its scope fall relationships, power structures, authority structures, the use of language, choice of teaching material, songs, poems, images, messages about gender values, the teaching of history and many others (Freire, 2000). It is an area of study which has been extensively mapped over the last forty years, by authors such as Henry Giroux (1983), bell hooks (1994), John Gatto (2013), particularly concerning how it can disadvantage minority groups. I am not aware that the commonly taught Steiner curriculum has been investigated to any significant degree to see what aspects of a ‘hidden curriculum’ can be identified and how they manifest. If this is the case, the work is overdue.

## Diversity and representation

The question of diversity and how diversity is presented in schools and their communities is one that extends beyond the classroom walls. To what extent do or should schools reflect their wider communities? This is not a new question. When the first school was founded in Stuttgart in 1919, it was begun for workers’ children. This beginning had a strong element of social justice within it. Before many years had passed, it became more a school for the children of anthroposophists, and not necessarily representing of the wider community of Stuttgart (Tautz, 1982).

Every school is different, but there are questions which may be relevant to all. In towns whose populations include those of different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and beliefs, are these groups present within Steiner schools? My experience is that they are not. There are understandable reasons such as accessibility and finance which play into this, but it remains a valid question. I have asked teachers in different countries if their school communities reflect their wider communities and if they are satisfied with the status quo. The answers I have

received through this ad hoc, non-representative process have varied but fall into two identifiable groups: around half the teachers I have spoken to indicate that they want better minority representation within their school and that it is a concern that the schools do not reflect the wider population; the other half comment that they are not seeking greater diversity in the classroom, that this can bring with it problems and that they would rather teach the children who 'belong' in a Steiner school. Perhaps not coincidentally, when these children who 'belong' were described, they happened to be white and middle-class. In my experience, this is something which is not often talked about in teacher meetings.

Before meetings, teachers in many schools read the so-called Motto of the Social Ethic,

A healthy social life is found only, when in the mirror of each soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the whole community the virtue of each one is living (Steiner, 1927)

This is chosen to help cultivate a healthy social life of the teacher body and of the school community. It is a well-known verse in Steiner communities. Expanding the context of the verse, might a school organism need to reflect its 'whole community' for it to be truly healthy, and not just the school community? Conversely, if a school does not reflect its wider community, is it then by definition 'unhealthy'? Certainly, reflecting the myriad viewpoints of the wider community while remaining a school teaching out of a deep understanding of Waldorf pedagogy, supported by Steiner's spiritual science is a great challenge for this time of ever-increasing diversity.

## Approaches for development

Martyn Rawson states that Steiner education has "barely begun to reflect critically on what this expansion means in terms of the transmission of ideas into different cultures and different settings" (Rawson, 2010, p. 2). To this I would include established Waldorf communities with a growing multi-cultural population.

The lack of criticality is echoed by Alain Denjean. He writes in the Pedagogical Section journal, that a teacher can approach the curriculum in four ways: exploring its spiritual depth day by day; as a worn-out path; as a tradition; and as a mere set of norms to be followed (2014, p. 20). Reading articles, browsing through books of teacher materials, visiting schools around the world, leads me to suspect that the Waldorf educational movement is one troubled by teachers following a worn-out path, a tradition or just complying to a set of norms to a degree by dogmatism, ideologies, recipe teaching, the over-reliance on tradition, and is one which can value safeguarding pedagogical inheritances more than developing new, and perhaps more contemporary, approaches.

Ida Oberman identifies three approaches to development (2008, p. 270). These are (in changed order and paraphrased):

1. **Purist** – 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. I believe this is the approach which Wiechert's 'myth busting' seeks to challenge.
2. **Accommodationist** – developing hybrids 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. The process can involve more accretions being added to the shell of Steiner education.
3. **Evolutionist** – adapting 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.

It is clear that all teachers use all three approaches. Each school embodies them in a different combination. It is useful to recognise where each of us places priority; to identify if we work in a school which has as an underlying gesture of purism, of accommodationism or of evolutionism; to assess the approach we ourselves have most sympathy with. The stereotypes are easy to follow.

Oberman identifies three well-known founding anthroposophists who, to her, exemplified these approaches to some degree. They are:

1. Marie Steiner, Caroline von Heyderbrand, Karl Stockmeyer
2. Hermann von Baravalle
3. Ita Wegman

This indicates that the issue is not a new one.

All three approaches have strengths and weaknesses.

1. **Purist** - "It is good for children." Steiner education is a tried and tested model with a proven record of success over nearly a hundred years. There is no great need to change, just follow accepted practice as well as possible. If things are fundamentally changed, there is danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.
2. **Accommodationist** – this can involve starting off with the 'traditional' Waldorf approach and then gradually exchanging content to suit the local context and environment. In a New Zealand context this could mean replacing a European story with an Indigenous one; a local song for one from overseas; making something with flax rather than a 'European' material; adding additional festivals to the school calendar. These are all positive developments.

However, this can lead to possible additivity or contributionism (Novick, 1988). Contributionism is principally integrationist in its aim, stressing the contribution of (usually minority) groups to the greater good. On the surface a positive step, it relies on the minority group been seen initially as 'other.' In literature on education for social justice, this approach is identified as carrying with it a danger of teaching *about* different cultures and traditional practices, remaining on the surface rather than incorporating them deeply into the curriculum (teaching *for* different cultures rather than *about*). It runs counter to current New Zealand educational policy on Māori for instance (Ministry of Education, 2011) which seeks to ensure Māori students succeed as Māori, and not on others' terms.

This additive approach is identified in Tang's doctoral thesis on Waldorf education in Taiwan (2010, see pp. 140-141). It is what I recently attempted to highlight in a short article called *Sticking wings on a caterpillar* (2014) in which I tried to encourage a re-thinking of the curriculum and the localisation of Steiner education. I compared the additive approach to sticking wings on a caterpillar and calling it a butterfly – the appearance may have changed but there has been no essential transformation.

3. **Evolutionist** – if we do not want to stick wings on a caterpillar, what might a true metamorphosis look like? What might it involve?

## Possible paths

To this end, Gordon's suggestions provide a starting point.

... it would be imperative in any school right now, in my view, to actually do its own audit of the time and place (quoted in Houghton, 2012, p. 70)

I put some possible questions which might arise within this process.

## Audit of time

- Does the taught curriculum look towards the future or is it essentially situated in past decades?
- Does it embrace or distance itself from the modern world? How and why?
- How strongly is the present-day reflected in the curriculum?
- How is history taught? Whose history is taught and whose is not taught?
- From whose perspective is history viewed?
- Within this, whose values are being expressed and promoted and whose are not? The more diverse a society is, the more this question needs careful thought.

## Audit of place

- Is the child's experience of the curriculum an unfolding from where she lives, from the local to the global or are there frequent references to other continents before even local geography has been approached?
- Is the local geographic setting and local flora and fauna reflected in the choice and content of songs, poems, plays, materials, stories, images, etc., or are these frequently 'imported' from elsewhere?
- Does the Waldorf curriculum 'grow out of' the land or is it more imposed on it? Is there a tension between the hidden curriculum of 'traditional Waldorf' content and the child's lived experience in her environment?
- To what degree does it reflect what she sees through her window or when she walks down the street? Is there a disconnect to be bridged?

These two processes will help in assessing how the curriculum is located in time and space. What remains unquestioned however is how Steiner education is carried into different cultures and what that involves (Rawson, 2010). I believe that here a third audit is helpful, one of community. The ever-increasing diversity of population in many countries makes this as relevant in countries where Waldorf education is well established as in as ones where it is just developing. By the term school community I refer to the families, students and teachers of a school.

## Audit of community

- Is the school community a reflection of the wider community?
- Are minority viewpoints actively considered? Are they promoted? Are they welcome?
- Whose culture/s are being promoted in the curriculum and resource choice? Which are not visible?
- Whose culture/s are being promoted in the hidden curriculum? Which are not visible?
- Is this a reflection of the school community and wider society?
- How are contested issues handled (e.g. histories, world conceptions, cultural differences, gender roles, etc.)?

## Conclusion

Critics of Steiner education have talked of its being 'hermetically closed off,' 'normative' (quoted in Frielingsdorf, 2012), and that is 'antiquated' and 'anachronistic' (Ullrich, 2008). The small study I undertook in New Zealand affirmed some of this, with informed advocates and supporters of the education reporting finding it to a degree "mono-cultural, Eurocentric, unquestioning, over-reliant on tradition" in which (some)

people were “disinterested in others with no real impulse to understand.” With the centenary of the Steiner education movement fast approaching, this is clearly not where anyone wishes it to be.

These audits suggested by Gordon form an initial step towards the localising of Steiner education. They are a tool to help gain insight into and understanding of the status quo. If they are undertaken, I hope they may encourage a fresh and critical look at Steiner education and the Steiner curriculum and as it manifests around the world. Regardless of location and setting, they seek to promote three qualities which any effective pedagogy needs to foster:

- relating strongly to place you live in
- relating strongly to time you live in
- relating strongly to people around you

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