

Steiner Waldorf Education  
and the Irish Primary Curriculum:  
A Time of Opportunity

By

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# Abstract

The object of this research was to study the implications of Steiner Waldorf pedagogy delivered in National Schools, and to consider both its viability and usefulness. This research used both qualitative and quantitative methods of primary and secondary research.

A review was carried out of the literature of the Waldorf movement internationally and specific to Ireland. A history of the Waldorf movement in Ireland, as well as a brief overview of the history of Irish publicly funded education, were both created from published literature, schools' records, and websites. Interviews were conducted with all of the full time teachers at both of the temporarily recognised Steiner National Schools, Mol an Oige and Raheen Wood. Data was compiled that showed a significant drop in the Steiner Waldorf-specific background and training of newly hired teachers at the two schools over the three years since recognition, resulting today in the majority of teachers lacking any previous Steiner Waldorf training.

In fulfilling this objective, it was found that the value system of Steiner schools can be a useful addition to the options created for the families of Ireland. The general aims of the Primary School Curriculum were found to be in complete accord with those of the Steiner Waldorf approach, and multiple aspects of Waldorf pedagogy were identified which can be employed to deliver the curriculum in a vibrant and creative way. Areas of conflict were found to be centred around the Steiner Waldorf Schools' ethos, which is pedagogical rather than religious, presenting a challenge to the Department of Education and Skill's need for standardised quality assurance protocols. These areas of conflict were responded to with recommendations.

Ultimately, the objective of the Department should, where possible, be to support sound and creative approaches to primary education for children in Ireland. The findings of this project clearly suggest the Steiner Waldorf model is deserving of wider recognition in this regard. There remains some question, however, whether the Department of Education is prepared to grant enough latitude for Steiner National Schools to actually apply the Steiner Waldorf model. If such latitude is not granted, these schools run the risk of becoming Steiner Waldorf in name only.

# Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all those who participated in and contributed to this research, including the individuals who took part in the interviews. I would further like to thank all the staff at Mol an Óige and Raheen Wood Steiner National Schools, and at Hereford Steiner Academy, for their time, co-operation and use of facilities, without which this study would not have been accomplished.

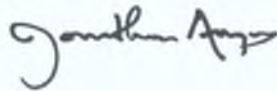
Also contributing to this research were all the children for whom I acted as Class Teacher over my years in the United States and Ireland. I wish to thank the 32 children of my class at the Minnesota Waldorf School from 1995 – 2001, and the 31 children of my combined class at Raheen Wood Steiner School from 2002 – 2008.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Doireann O'Connor for her time and encouragement, and for the support she dedicated to this research.

Finally, I wish to thank Gavin for friendship and invaluable advice, and Veronica for her untiring belief, support and understanding. Lastly, thank you Fionn for your inspiration. You all made it possible.

# Declaration

I confirm that the enclosed is all my own work with acknowledged exception.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Angus". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping tail on the 's'.

Jonathan Angus

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# 1 Introduction

This project is primarily concerned with showing the value of Steiner Waldorf education and its potential as part of a national scheme of diversified education. Although the crisis in education is a global problem no one today suggests that Ireland is immune to this predicament. In fact, the actual quality of our educational output compared to international standards appears to have dropped. The OECD/Pisa survey of educational achievement of fifteen year olds shows that from 2000 to 2009 a drop in ranking from fifth to seventeenth place in reading levels occurred, and from 16th to 26th place in maths (OECD, 2010).

If one were to measure the success of our educational system by an uncritical look at the examination results for Leaving Certificate and third level exams, the conclusion would be that all is going quite well. The percentage of first class honours degrees awarded at Irish universities has increased nearly threefold in the past fifteen years, while the number of students awarded a perfect Leaving Certificate is up fivefold (RTE News, 2010). A report prepared by Trinity College's academic secretary Patricia Callaghan leaves no doubt that grade inflation is an evidential factor in increases, concluding that “the academic worth of a primary degree from Irish universities (and UK universities) since 1994 has been devalued significantly” (Walshe, 2010).

Irish schools are underfunded. Ireland ranks 30<sup>th</sup> out of thirty-four countries in terms of education expenditure as a percentage of GDP, according to a recent OECD Education Report (2008). Clearly the free flow of capital during the Celtic Tiger years did not result in a bonanza for primary education. The Infrastructure Investment Priorities 2010-2016 document outlines the financial framework for capital investment in that period.

Taking into account economic developments in recent years, the expected substantial reduction on the expenditure promised in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 is outlined. Total expenditure of €39bn is envisaged over the period, and of that €4.21bn

will be spent on education. The capital investment plans for education have also been dramatically reduced. More than €3bn of the new investment will be used to upgrade primary and secondary schools (Department of Finance, 2010).

These significant cuts come at a time of unprecedented need when Ireland is experiencing the greatest growth in its school going population in recent history. At present there are 519,000 enrolled in primary schools, with the number steadily rising. Although the massive influx of immigrants has slowed down in recent years in most parts of the country, over 75,000 births were registered in 2008, the highest rate since 1896 (Central Statistics Office, 2009).

We are seeing the beginnings of a shift in the system where the government of Ireland cedes responsibility for the education of its children. Currently, the Catholic Church is the patron of ninety-two percent of the 3,200 primary schools in the Republic. Catholic and Protestant primary schools give priority to members. Some ninety percent of the primary schools in Dublin South East have waiting lists. Effectively, a “compulsory Catholic” situation exists for public education there (Quinn, 2010).

Bishop Leo O’Reilly, chairman of the bishops’ commission on education, commented in December, 2009 on discussions with the Department of Education about the transfer of patronage, saying, “There is a need for pluralism of education in Ireland so that parents have a choice, as far as possible, about what kind of school their children will attend....In a changing Ireland, additional forms of patronage are emerging.” (O’Reilly, 2009).

Colm O’Gorman head of Amnesty International Ireland, said, “The debate should not just be about getting the church out of Irish schools; it should be about getting the State properly involved in our schools.” He claims that the Government has utterly failed in its legal responsibility to deliver on the fundamental human right of free primary education. The then Education Minister Mary Hanafin declared that the government “had no legal responsibility for what happens in our schools” (Flynn, 2010).



Other patrons exist. Though the state constitution recognised “the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens” up until 1973, other religions up to the present are provided funding to run a number of primary and secondary schools throughout the country, including the Church of Ireland (Anglican), Presbyterian, Methodist, Jewish, Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses, Quaker and Hindu. Educate Together arises from a multi-denominational religious ethos.

There are some schools that offer some limited pedagogical alternatives, as well. Gaelscoileanna provide primary education through an immersion environment in the Irish Gaelic language. There are also a number of special schools offering an adjusted curriculum for children with disabilities, young offenders, children at risk, children with specific learning disabilities and emotionally disturbed children.

Under the patronage of the Irish Vocational Education Association five primary schools have opened in recent years. This is the first time in the history of the Irish State that primary education has been provided by a government body. Patronage by the V.E.C. is a move toward government directed education, but there appears to be no indications that the V.E.C. envisions pedagogical changes beyond the religion curriculum (Co. Dublin VEC, n.d.). Like other non Catholic schools before them, the new V.E.C. schools promise parental choice only as regards the religious/spiritual aspects of their children's education.

In February 2008, the Department of Education & Science recognised two Steiner National School in County Clare and in September of that year began to cover most of the schools' expenses. This process had taken more than twelve years, and included a High Court case brought by Raheen Wood Steiner School, after the Department initially refused recognition on the issues of teacher qualifications and the ability by all teachers to teach Gaelic. Although some teachers employed by the plaintiff met both criteria, most did not. On the advice of the New Schools Advisory Committee, Minister Hanafin granted 'temporary recognition', a new category that has not been used for any other schools since, under the proviso that the schools would employ only state trained

teachers and would implement the National Primary Curriculum through the Waldorf model of education. The County Clare Vocational Education Committee had agreed to act as a patron for the schools but this was rejected by the Minister, who later agreed to recognise a new patron body for the Steiner schools, called Lifeways, Ltd. (Walshe, 2008). This charitable organisation had been established some years previously to develop a Waldorf based child care programme in Shannon, County Clare. Although that project had never reached fruition the organisational structure was in place, and the directors were willing to accept national school patronage responsibility.

The introduction to the 1999 Primary Curriculum draws attention to each school's unique organisation, character, tradition and culture, as well as values and priorities. Influenced by size, location, and environmental circumstances, both internal and external, each school is recognised as serving a unique community of pupils and parents viewed from a unique perspective, that translates into a distinct set of values, attitudes and expectations that characterise the ethos of the school. (DES, 1999). Steiner Waldorf Education, if allowed a permanent place in state funded primary education, will be the first to use a unique set of fundamental principles, resulting in a truly distinct pedagogical approach.

Ireland has gone through many dramatic changes over the last decades. Among other things, it has reversed its historic flow of emigrants off island to a become a destination for immigrants from throughout the world. The significant economic downturn of recent months will not completely erase this trend toward a refashioning of the Irish populace. The Department of Education and Skills has voiced its intention to diversify, providing more choices to parents and students of what can be called the ethos of schools in Ireland (DES, 2010), reflecting the belief that diversity through educational approaches builds a stronger populace. The 1999 Curriculum recognises what can take place when schools adapt and interpret the curriculum where necessary to meet their own unique requirements (DES, Introduction, p. 11).

I have undertaken this research project in hopes of clarifying whether or not one alternative educational approach deserves to be given a place in the range of pedagogical options offered to the children and families of Ireland.

A note about terminology: When describing this educational approach, the names Steiner and Waldorf are interchangeable. This understandably results in some confusion. Historically, each school adopting these methods was independent from the others: there is no central body responsible for establishing Steiner/Waldorf schools in the world. In the U.K. and Australia, Steiner was the name most often adopted for schools, and much of the literature reflects that preference. Whereas on continental Europe and the Americas, Waldorf is usually chosen. Here in Ireland, schools have used both names.

Because this project is primarily interested in the application of this pedagogy in State sponsored schools, it is useful to adopt the term used most frequently internationally. By far the greatest number of publicly funded schools of this type are in Germany, where the name given them is Waldorf. The public sector area of largest growth in recent decades appears to be the United States, where, again, Waldorf is the commonly used term.

I have decided for this thesis to refer to the educational approach founded by Rudolf Steiner as Waldorf education, and the schools who employ that method, whether public or independent, as Waldorf Schools, except where referencing specific schools who have adopted the name Steiner.

A note on gender specific pronouns in reference to an indefinite person: to avoid gender bias by referring to all as one gender, and to avoid the awkwardness of referring to each as 'he or she', I have chosen a unique approach that I hope will not bring too much attention to itself. The indefinite persons in this project are always either teachers or children. I have followed a simple formula of referring to children in the masculine and teachers in the feminine.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 What Is Waldorf Education?

#### 2.1.1 Biography: Rudolf Steiner

To fully understand Waldorf Education and the ways in which it can be effectively applied in Ireland today, it is helpful to know something of its founder and chief early proponent, Rudolf Steiner: his philosophical outlook and the remarkable diversity of activity that has arisen from the application of his methods; and the foundations upon which Waldorf Education is built.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian philosopher, literary scholar, playwright, architect, social thinker, and esotericist, best known as the founder of Waldorf Schools (Garner, 2007). He was born in Kraljevec, Austria, on the border of the Austro-Hungarian empire, an area now in Croatia (Barnes, 1997). His father was a telegraph operator, later a station master for the train company, and his family moved a number of times in his early years (Steiner, 1924-1925). Throughout this time, he had direct contact with what was then cutting edge technology. It is difficult for us to comprehend how significant the railways were in the late nineteenth century as a technology that led to the mixing of cultures and sharing of ideas, the unfettering of interaction between various peoples and regions/landscapes. Add to this the introduction of telegraphy, and you can see that Rudolf Steiner's boyhood was uniquely modern (Shepherd, 1954).

In fact, unlike most other philosophers, he underwent a thoroughly practical contemporary scientific education, at the Vienna Technische Hochschule. He formed the epistemological basis for his later work in his book *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1894), preceded by his doctoral thesis in Philosophy published in book form as *Truth and Knowledge: Introduction to The Philosophy of Freedom* (1892). He worked from 1883 to 1897 at the Goethe-Schiller archives in Weimar, where he edited the definitive edition of Goethe's scientific papers and collaborated on the Centenary Edition of Goethe's works. Goethe's conviction that the act of knowing produces a new form of

consciousness was Steiner's inspiration to further develop this new kind of thinking into a scientific methodology, by which the spiritual world could be experienced within the organic world and thereby directly researched (Lachman, 2007). As Goethe did not explicitly conceptualize his philosophy of life, Steiner filled this need by creating his own philosophy that established a sound basis for extending scientific investigation through the means of pure thinking, beyond the boundaries of the sense perceptible. This is in contrast to many approaches to spirituality that neglect or suppress the thinking faculty (Philosophy of Freedom, n.d.).

This evolution of Steiner's earlier philosophical principles into a approach to systematically research psychological and spiritual phenomena he termed Anthroposophy. To contrast with the mainstream science of his day, that he perceived as only interested in material aspects to the universe, and also to distinguish his approach from religion or mystical searching, he often referred to Anthroposophy as a form of Spiritual Science (1904, 1910, 1916, 1922), that he defined as “a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe” (Steiner, 1923–1925).

Though fundamental modifications were necessitated to research the spiritual realm, Steiner intended for the methods of Anthroposophy to be wholly in keeping with those of natural science, “in the sense that any unprejudiced person trained in natural science can accept the premises of spiritual science” (Steiner, 1914, p.2). He believed that Anthroposophy could be practically applied in many area of human activity, including education (Clouder, 2003).

He became a popular author and lecturer, presenting his ideas to diverse groups of people throughout Europe. Although he made three trips to the British Isles (England and Wales), he never visited Ireland, though he was well-regarded by George William Russell, William Butler Yeats, and others in the Celtic Revival movement (Meyer, 1992).

Rudolf Steiner gave over 6,000 lectures in his lifetime, and authored more than thirty

books on broad themes of human and cosmic spiritual evolution. Steiner gave lectures over a wide range of topics that included the history of tobacco, shipping routes, the invention of paper, and beekeeping always stressing process over product.

Anthroposophy is not a theoretical system, but a method for direct observational research, and the body of knowledge that results from such research.

In the year 1924 in Dornach, Switzerland, Steiner founded the Free Academy of Spiritual Science. This organisation was made up of various specialised sections. In addition to a Pedagogical Section, there are departments for anthroposophical research into Mathematics, Astronomy, Medicine, Natural Science, Biodynamic Agriculture (harbinger of the Organics movement), Social Sciences, and the Arts. About the last, Steiner inaugurated Eurythmy, a movement art form (Goetheanum, n.d.), and his ideas on aesthetics inspired the pioneering abstract painters Mondrian and Kandinsky (Rubin, 1973).

Steiner was influenced by Rousseau and other Revolutionary Era French philosophers who helped him elucidate his blueprint for social Utopia, whereby three independent systems of collective life (Economy, Government, and Arts & Sciences) are conceived to function as a harmonious totality. Steiner christened this contribution to the social sciences the threefold social order, and it has received renewed interest in these challenging times. Additionally, the influence of Steiner's multifaceted understanding has led to innovative and holistic approaches in philosophy and religious renewal.

Strange that his important insights are not better known. Both Wilson (1985), and later, Ullrich (1994) argued that Steiner may have been too prolific for his own good. Their position is that the vast scale and variety of his published material is itself a hindrance, in the current climate of extreme academic specialisation, with the sheer quantity of his literary and rhetorical output obscuring the clarity and simplicity of his basic insight. More recently, Lachman (2007) reached the same conclusion, opining that professionals in their respective fields might automatically consider a person of such great and varied learning as Steiner to be only a dabbling amateur. Although there may be truth to this observation, it is a depressing comment on the state of modern intelligentsia. Lachman

and Ullrich also note that his works dealing with disreputable subjects such as Atlantis, reincarnation and astral bodies confirm for many that his work lacks the rigour of traditional scientific enquiry. Whereas Steiner's advocates argue that it is the very nature of his spiritual scientific methodology to shine the light of consciousness onto areas inaccessible to a one-sided, so-called objective, scientific approach (Finser, 1994, Childs, 1995, Barnes, 1997). For Steiner, there were three types of knowledge: the ordinary intellectual apprehension of the world available to our senses, the direct apprehension of spiritual realities through pure thinking, and a newly accessible knowledge of spiritual realities expressed in the sense world, derivable through direct meditation on experiences perceived through the senses (Shepherd, 1954).

The anthroposophical movement in Ireland started over fifty years ago, with Camphill Communities catering for the needs of developmentally disabled children and adults forming in the North and later in the Republic. Additionally, anthroposophical medical work, biodynamic agriculture, the Waldorf education movement, both for children and the training of teachers, and the Anthroposophical Society in Ireland, are all well established.

Albert Schweitzer, characterised the life's work of Rudolf Steiner as being the same as his own...

to strive for the rise of true culture enlivened and formed by humane ideals, and to stimulate people to become truly thoughtful human beings. I have rejoiced at the achievement which his great personality and his profound humanity have brought about in the world (Schweitzer, 2003).

At present, more than 350 volumes of his writings and lectures are available from the Rudolf Steiner Verlag in Dornach, Switzerland. His reforming ideas, fruits of active research encompassing an astonishing variety of subjects, still have exceptional relevance.

## 2.1.2 Epistemological Foundation to Waldorf Education

Steiner argued that the anthroposophic approach to knowledge is a further development of Western thought, a continuance of the philosophical stream of Plato and Aristotle and consequently, of German Idealism, as represented by Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling. Steiner focused his attention on how areas of reality present themselves, and on how, and through what methods, they can be differently ascertained (Kienle, Kiene & Albonico, 2006).

Starting in the year 1888, Steiner began writing his seminal work in philosophy, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, which has appeared under a number of English titles, including *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*, wherein he presents the case for Spiritual Science. He intended for it to be a training manual for spiritual development, capable of leading to super-sensible perception solely through thinking. This book thoroughly presents Steiner's epistemology, based on the work of Goethe as well as his own spiritual perception, including his ethics of freedom. This latter is based on his assertion that development of the ability to think and act independently of physical nature, what he considered to be free spiritual activity, is a suitable and reliable path for individuals to attain true knowledge of themselves, of society, and of the universe (McDermott, 1984).

It is said by his supporters that Steiner's writings, rather than presenting a set of creeds, pieties, or doctrines, offer a mode of inquiry (Hughes, 1995). What others see as his "often strange and esoteric diction (which) places practically insurmountable obstacles in the path of scientific and philosophical analysis" (Ullrich, 1994, p. 555), those who support his approach see as a direct result of an intentional writing style, one that causes the reader to practice a more active thinking, stimulating creative (spiritual) cognitive activity, with the eventual goal of developing within the reader the ability to think his insights oneself (Hughes, 1995).

The conventional distinction between natural and spiritual science is broken down when one perceives and credits non-physical formative forces, which cannot be experienced



through the senses but exclusively through the intellect. A perspective of the natural world as having an intellectual-spiritual constitution, gained if one accepts that thinking is an essentially spiritual activity, results in an understanding different to that of conventional science, and forms the basis of anthroposophy (Kienle, Kiene & Albonico, 2006).

In early Western cognitive development, Gnosis, a form of Christianity rooted in ancient mysteries, was declared heretical by the Church because of the emphasis it placed on the spiritual, to the detriment of the physical world (Cruse, 2002). Today we have the opposite emphasis, arising from an epistemological dualism, which undervalues the spiritual world. Materialistic science is given near exclusive validity toward understanding the physical world, leaving religion to minister to the needs of the soul and its 'salvation'. Those scientists who attempt to live as dualists in the spiritual and the physical world can only do so in a manner that, apparently, contradicts logic. Simply put, Steiner sought to heal this malaise of consciousness by re-engaging the ancient mysteries, though in metamorphosed form, through a rigorous and disciplined 'science of the spirit', where the cognitive development of each individual once again becomes a path to spiritual knowledge (Cruse, 2002).

Whereas the findings of natural science are derived from observations made through the senses, those of spiritual science arise from direct observation of phenomena not perceptible through ordinary means. Steiner saw these elements of humanity and the universe as forming the foundation of the sensory world. And they are only hidden, he claimed, until we develop the capacity and habit of seeing them. The unique constitution of man allows us, through cognition, to form perceptions of general concepts and laws, to reflect on those perceptions and on our own actions, and to thereby realise direct knowledge of the super-sensible world. This led Steiner (1910) to suggest that the human being can be seen as the microcosm through which the macrocosm of all existence can be experienced.

In contrast to the dogmatic reductionism popular near the turn of the last century, the cognitive approach developed by Steiner led him to the vitalistic view that, in addition

to physical and chemical forces, formative forces are active in nature, with unique types involved in the formation of minerals, plants, animals, and humans, respectively, each more complex and involved than the previous (Steiner, 1923a).

Although at odds with the prevailing convictions of 19th century Cartesian and Newtonian physics which still underpin most scientific discourse today, the actual facts of modern developmental biology show examples of profound concordance with Steiner's holistic view. Joseph Chilton Pearce (2002) points to the prediction by Rudolf Steiner that, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, humanity will have discovered that the heart, rather than merely a pumping muscle, is a profound source of evolutionary intelligence, and that the greatest challenge to 21<sup>st</sup> century humans will be to allow the heart to teach us to think in a new way. Pearce then points to recent scientific discoveries in the field of Neuro-cardiology, specifically

1. The heart is made up of 60 to 65 % neuro cells, functioning exactly as the cells in our brain, with a direct and unmediated neural connection to the limbic structure, or emotional cognitive portion of the brain.
2. The heart is a major endocrine gland, producing hormones which profoundly affect the operations of the brain and every organ of the body.
3. The heart produces an enormously powerful electromagnetic field, detectable up to 5 meters from the source, 50 times greater than the output of the brain.

He argues that these findings confirm and vindicate Steiner's radical insights into heart-based intelligence, and argues that the need to learn heart thinking as presented by Steiner is self evident.

Other examples could be gleaned from the emerging field of Epigenetics, which has dealt an unexpected blow to Crick's "central dogma" that genetic information flows cells only one-way, from DNA to RNA to protein (Commoner, 2002). Some research now indicates that epigenetic mechanisms may constitute an organisms ability to integrate environmental information into its genetic function, and that consciousness may overrule our genetic blueprint.

Lachman (1995) identifies three fundamental insights of Steiner's: that the I is

irreducible and free. that consciousness is at the core of the universe, and that we are the answer to the riddle of world. He suggest that these are of such great importance as to be impossible to overestimate.

Waldorf Education's epistemological foundations are significant to gain a full understanding of the educational system Rudolf Steiner founded. To determine whether it has value as an option within state-provided education in Ireland today, it will be necessary to look at the methods employed.

### 2.1.3 Fundamental Ideas of Waldorf Education

Rudolf Steiner's educational approach was radically distinct from other approaches of his day and, although perhaps the fastest growing educational model throughout the world, it remains today relatively unexamined critically by mainstream educational theorists and policy makers (Goral 2009). Since the time of Steiner's activity, however, many educational reforms adopted aspects of his approach. Yet the core set of ideas is still largely ignored (McDermott 1984, Goral 2009)

Rudolf Steiner was asked in Spring of 1919 by Emil Molt, managing director and joint-proprietor of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette company in Stuttgart, Germany, if he would create a school for the children of the factory's workforce. This was in the chaotic time after World War I, but also a time when new hope had arisen. and Molt, a philanthropic industrialist, initiated the school out of genuine interest in the welfare of his employees. The school was ready in Autumn, less that 5 months after the decision to start it (Easton, 1995).

The initial induction of teachers took place over fourteen days, and comprised lectures and workshops each day. Steiner lectured on the nature of the human being from a spiritual-psychosomatic point of view, where he emphasised the need for education to be deeply rooted in an understanding of human development through childhood (Masters, 2007).

Of the cohort of original teachers for the school, the majority had little or no experience

teaching children. Most were university academicians, and nearly all were asked by Steiner to teach something other than their area of expertise. As an example, Hermann von Baravalle, a mathematician, was asked to teach English. When he pointed out to Steiner that this was a language he didn't know, he was told that he would have to study it, and would be a few days ahead of the children at each step. These staffing choices were made through Steiner belief that each possessed the right qualities and potential as teachers in the new school, and reflect Steiner's belief that young children can benefit more from a modelling of earnest of striving to learn than from smoothly presented mastery of a subject, that what you know is less significant than who you fundamentally are (Childs, 1995). The importance he placed upon the individual's attitude toward life is well summarised when he says...“Make no mistake, it is largely a question of interest in the children and the young people and a matter of enthusiasm. We shall not get anywhere in any direction without enthusiasm and inner mobility” (Steiner, 1923-1924, p 106).

Since the founding of the first project, Waldorf Schools have won an international reputation as education that stresses the dignity and the individuality of the growing child, one that develops creative and clear thinking individuals with a strong interest in contributing to their communities (Querido, 1995).

An unintended aspect of the ninety-two year development of Waldorf Education is that the majority of these schools are primarily funded through tuition fees, the result being that the communities that grow up around these schools are often made up not only of parents who are more actively engaged and interested in their children's education (a demographic phenomena associated with any school of choice) but also predominantly of a secure middle class with greater discretionary income, and never a true cross-section of the wider communities in which they reside. Scholarships ensure that some children of working class families enroll, but they remain a small minority in these private schools (Easton, 1995).

This elitism was in no way part of the first Waldorf school, which was funded through the largesse of Herr Molt (Hofrichter, 2002). Economic segregation was expressly

forbade by Rudolf Steiner as a condition of his participation in the endeavour. In 1919 in Germany, the mingling of children from different class backgrounds was truly revolutionary (Easton, 1995). For the first few years, students were predominantly the children of factory workers – mostly communist & atheist parents, but also Catholic and Protestant. Part of the rationale for the great curricular scope of the school was that Steiner set it up in full knowledge that most of the pupils would not be able to attend university upon graduation. Schwartz suggests that Steiner intended for a student to get in eight years what more entitled children would get over the course of sixteen, in quality rather than quantity (Schwartz, 2009).

Steiner presented so many new and unique pedagogical ideas that it would not be possible to explore them all here. I have, though, included here brief description of four more areas of interest: Temperaments, Eurythmy, Form Drawing, and Learning Support.

Rudolf Steiner emphasized the importance of the four classical **temperaments** in colouring of the human personality. He believed that temperament exerts a strong, though not exclusive, influence particularly during the second seven year phase of life. He therefore argued an awareness of this model was an important tool for primary educators as a basis to describe and understand children, and an avenue into teaching which can be utilized to help with discipline issues and to help determine the methods used with individual children and class balance.

Rather than a purely biological origin for temperament, Steiner hypothesized the combining of a hereditary stream with a stream that derives from the education and experience of an individual through numerous lifetimes, preserved through reincarnation. The specific way in which these two streams combine determines what relationship the four bodies of the individual human being will enter into with one another.

In every case, one of the four members achieves predominance over the others, and gives them its own peculiar stamp. Where the physical body predominates, there results a melancholic temperament. Where the etheric or life-body predominates, we find a phlegmatic temperament. Where the astral body predominates, we can expect a

sanguine temperament. And when the ego predominates, a choleric temperament results.

Steiner was not suggesting that children can be divided therefore into four categories, as individuals often combine aspects of several to form a completely unique profile. He described less and more mature forms for each temperament. For instance, an introspective predominantly melancholic child may be sullen and self-absorbed, but can become a sympathetic helper or a deep thinker. He suggested that an astute teacher can support children in transforming their own temperaments. (Steiner, 1909)

**Eurythmy** is an expressive movement art originated by Rudolf Steiner in conjunction with Marie von Sivers. Primarily a performance art which pre-dates the Waldorf schools, it was included in the curriculum as a form of movement therapy (Stockmeyer, 1985).

The gestures that build the basic movement repertoire of a eurythmist are connected to the sounds and rhythms of language, to the tonal experience of music, to fundamental soul experiences (such as joy and sorrow), and so on. Once this fundamental repertoire is mastered, it can be composed into free artistic expressions (Eurythmy Ireland, n.d.).

One pedagogical aim of Eurythmy is to bring the children's expressive movement and feeling experience into harmony with a piece's content; eurythmy is thus sometimes called “visible music” or “visible speech”, expressions that originate with its founder. Rudolf Steiner described eurythmy as an “art of the soul” where “body, soul and spirit work harmoniously together, so that here one has to do with an ensouled and spiritualised form of gymnastics” (Steiner, 1923).

By means of awakening and strengthening the expressive capacities of children through movement, Eurythmy is purported to stimulate the child's imagination, ideation and conceptualization. An extensive set of special exercises has also been developed for pedagogical purposes. These include many geometric or dynamically choreographed movements (such as form metamorphoses), exercises to develop a child's coordination, concentration, precision and proprioceptive awareness.

**Form Drawing**, like Eurythmy, is a subject of study completely new to the syllabus of primary education (Niederhauser and Frohlich, 1984). Both are concerned with the elements of movement and form (Kutzli, 1985). Steiner (1919a) described the latter as a means of educating the temperaments. In his talks with teachers before the opening of the first school, he suggests that on the very first day of school each child should draw a straight and curved line on the blackboard (Steiner, 1919d). These two polar experiences are the archetypal principals in the art of line, and all drawing arises from them (Kutzli, 1985a).

Form drawing is a therapeutic art, meant to activate unfolding creative forces (Kutzli, 1985a). It usually precedes writing instruction, because it calls up the inner discipline the child needs to work with beauty and skill. Form drawing develops concentration, perseverance, control of the will, grace and purposefulness, and helps a child learn about boundaries (Niederhauser and Frohlich, 1984).

Form drawing is a moment of movement, and the visible result caught on a page is only the last crystallisation of an exercise of broad spatial gestures, done both physically by the children and sympathetically experienced through observation. Laws of nature, including metamorphosis, and many aspects of musicality are explored. A number of the more advanced exercises develop out of the plaited band of Celtic knot-work. The Book of Kells, for instance, offers a wealth of imagery to study and develop (Kutzli, 1985b). Accordingly, form drawing works with themes of particular resonance here in Ireland.

When considering **Learning Support**, it should first be noted that there are many aspects built into the structure of Waldorf education that make it suited to meeting the needs of children with learning challenges. One of these is that, wherever possible, the class teacher continues with one group throughout their primary years. Whereas many schools eschew this approach, believing that the child may form too strong an attachment to the individual teacher, it is precisely for the reason of forming strong relationship that this pupil-teacher continuity is fostered. By becoming deeply aware of each child's learning patterns and behaviour, the class teacher is then in a position to

adapt the content and approach of the various curricula to meet the needs of the individuals in the class. Ideally, each class teacher would be able to see and understand how each child should be met in order for him/her to develop the greatest inner freedom within the framework of what today's world offers and expects of each individual. More and more children are challenged in learning to calculate, read, and write, and the meeting of additional needs in the classroom is not possible in every case. For this reason, learning support must play its part.

Steiner Waldorf education methods are healing in themselves, and many high incidence learning challenges can be ameliorated within the classroom. Each school day begins with a so-called rhythmic time, including singing, choral recitation of rhythmic speech, consciously directed small- and large-motor movement, listening and responding, and cognitive challenges; all integrated into an artistic whole that relates to the lesson to come. This, coupled with the teacher meeting each child individually at the door with a handshake and sharing a few words, help the child to really feel they have arrived at school and are warmly accepted.

Children learn at their own pace, and unfold abilities at different times. The fact that some children do not show signs of grasping literacy as soon as their peers is not in itself a warning sign. The focus of the support must be on removing hindrances, not “making normal”.

When the class teacher finds the question of how to meet the needs of an individual student to be an enigma, a study of that child is arranged for the weekly faculty meeting, often held over three successive meetings. When all the teachers of the school do no more than contemplatively (and surreptitiously) observe and then discuss an individual child, it can have a remarkable effect on the well being of that child. Out of these studies usually arises an insightful individual educational plan.

The individual assessments that are carried out every two years in the Waldorf system are of vital importance in recognising learning difficulties. Uniquely, although these assessments sometimes feature maths and literacy, they are not measuring cognitive



development alone. Rather than analytic, a holistic view of child development is used in the approach to information gathering. For Waldorf methods of remediation, it can be more significant to know a child's dominance profile (that he writes with his right hand, but listens primarily with the left ear, for instance) than whether or not he knows all of the alphabet. In fact, there are even children who show no outward signs of learning challenges, but who have awkwardness in movement and are not particularly active, who can greatly benefit from this type of remedial work.

Early intervention needs to be balanced with the need to not too early awaken the self consciousness of the child. Much can be done in the classroom, either by the class teacher or learning support teacher, specifically targeted to the needs of one child or a small group of children. Taking the child out of the class environment for individual remedial work would in most cases not occur before class two, though an attempt to identify learning difficulties is made much earlier, with the first individual assessment carried out by a learning support teacher already in Junior Infants.

### 2.1.3.1 Rudolf Steiner's View of the Three Fold Human Being

There are two aspects to developmentally-derived curricula at play in Waldorf education. The larger one is a schema of 7 year phases in the life of a child, and the methods used to cater to the dominant 'soul capacity' in each (Rawson and Richter, 2000). In this picture, early childhood, from birth until the seventh birthday, is seen as the first complete phase of life. The middle phase of childhood is from age 7 through 14, and the later phase of childhood is the period from 14 until 21. The other aspect is the specific journey of recapitulating Cultural Epochs over the course of the second 7 year phase. In this section I will look at the first of these, and in the next, the second.

At the root of Waldorf pedagogy is a spiritually influenced picture of child development. The concept of developmental phases in childhood was explored by both Jean Piaget and Arnold Gesell subsequent to Steiner, though each man's perspective has fundamental differences from the others (Salkind, 2004). In Steiner's picture, the years before adulthood are schematically broken into three, seven year cycles.

Repeatedly throughout his lectures and written works, Steiner explored and developed pictures of the three major powers of the human soul, which he referred to as Thinking, Feeling, and Willing. He argued that these are the dominant ways through which we connect with the world, with one predominating in each seven year phase, and that pedagogues must become aware of this to most effectively teach children as they pass through these periods. In Waldorf education, the transcendental qualities of Truth, Beauty and Goodness are seen as archetypal keynotes that also align with the three phases of childhood. Steiner integrated Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's concept of educating the Head, Heart, and Hands into his schema also, arguing that, whereas education at all stages should be wholistic and integrated, each phase can be seen to correspond to one set of capacities, with an emphasis on learning through the hands as a young child, through the heart in middle childhood, and through the head in later youth.

This schema of essential phases of human development can be seen to have a biological reality. Around our seventh year we begin to lose our first set of teeth. Steiner observed that this dramatic event is one sign of the complete conversion of a physical body given to us by heredity at birth, to one that is remade by the individual (Steiner, 1919b, 1920b). The year moving toward our fourteenth is often the time of the start of puberty, and 21 is considered in many cultures to be the age of majority, at which we finally enter adult life, and it can be said that we have acquired an adult body. More than just physical changes, Steiner saw these shifts as the thresholds into new ways of experiencing the world, calling for fundamental changes to the way in which education should be approached.

Nor is Steiner's delineation of seven year cycles to human life unique. One can look back to Solon of Athens (c. 594 BC), one of the great law-makers of ancient Greece, who described the archetypal human life in 10 seven year stages. Harwood (1971) claims that the instinctive feeling for the seven years' rhythm in life has only been abandoned in modern times. And to illustrate his contention that the grand concept of Thinking-Feeling-Willing is a part of a body of ancient wisdom, he gives as example the Zend Avesta, a collection of Middle Persian (3rd to 10th centuries) religious

interpretations. In which the first three steps the faithful take after death bring them through good thought paradise, good word paradise, and good deed paradise.

A schematic diagram might be useful to summarise a simple version of this model:

| Age 0 - 7                         | Age 7 - 14                  | Age 14 - 21                    |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Willing                           | Feeling                     | Thinking                       |
| Hands<br>(limbs and sense organs) | Heart<br>(rhythmic systems) | Head<br>(brain/nervous system) |
| Goodness                          | Beauty                      | Truth                          |
| 'good deed'                       | 'good word'                 | 'good thought'                 |

Throughout the first seven year phase of life, it is the educator's task to address the volition or Will of the child. The child learns best through imitation, and it is therefore incumbent upon the teacher to model behaviours that are both imitable by the young child, and worthy of imitation. Steiner (1924) connects free will in our actions that can potentially develop later in our lives to moral imaginations. To this end, an attempt is made to structure the whole learning environment as one inspired by the quality of **Goodness**.

In the second seven year phase, from the age of seven to fourteen, the heart of childhood is experienced, and the child opens to the world in a new way, where learning is naturally imaginative. It is through developing the child's emotional life that real education can occur. This is why the keynote for these middle school years is **Beauty**, and the arts are seen as the central motif through which the teacher can best meet the needs of the child.

In the third seven year phase, from the age of fourteen to twenty one, the child seeks for **Truth**. The capacity for abstract and conceptual thinking gradual evolves during this time. For example, the results of experimentation can now be extrapolated to show laws of great generality (Childs, 1999). Youth of this age require learning through intellectual understanding, often achieved through integrated and partially self-initiated educational

projects. It is also the age when a sense for moral judgement deepens. Consequently, active social engagement and responsibility through community service is essential.

Within each of these phases, Rudolf Steiner identified sub-phases that precede or recapitulate the larger three-part nature of development, so that in the early section of each of the three periods of childhood (say from birth to 2, from 7 to 9, and from 14 to 16) the child goes through an echo of the imitative Will phase, with that emphasis on whatever larger stage he passes through (Rawson & Masters, 2003). The pedagogical significance of this orientation will be explained through specific examples below.

A classic analogy often presented to Waldorf teacher trainees is between a child and a butterfly: from age 0 to 7, the child is in the egg stage, age 7 to 14 is the caterpillar, and from 14 to 21, a butterfly. The primary school teacher must not treat the caterpillar like a butterfly, attempting to teach it to fly. And the secondary school teacher must not expect the butterfly to already know how to be a butterfly.

At more advanced levels of study, the anthroposophical schema of the three-fold human being becomes more intricate. Steiner gave names to the coalescences of subtle forces that he said shape and direct each of these seven year phases. In order, he named them the Etheric Body, the Astral Body, and the Ego Body (Steiner, 1904). These terms are used elsewhere, both before and since Steiner's time, to mean sometimes similar but often profoundly different concepts, so it is easy to misstep in understanding without careful and thorough study of Steiner specific intention in the use of these terms. For our purposes, though, exploration into these realms would be unproductive.

Perhaps it is Steiner's image of the human being – as a three fold being, with a spiritual aspect, on the way through a lifelong journey, that is the fundamental difference between a Waldorf teacher and State teacher. Becoming aware of these developmentally related shifts in self identity for the child is an essential pedagogical tool. Through recognising and adapting to these phases of development, the Waldorf teacher reaches ultimate effectiveness in educating the child (Mitchell, 2006).

### 2.1.3.2 Human Development as a Reflection of Cultural Development

At the heart of the curriculum is a journey of discovery, a narrative of unfolding knowledge of the world and of the self, often taught by the same class teacher for up to eight years, during which an 'evolution of consciousness' mapped out originally by Steiner and developed subsequently by many teachers and anthroposophical researchers. is used as a guide. This pedagogical insight, to sequence curricular content based on cultural advancement, as seen through the world views of a multitude of geographically and historically diverse societies, was developed soon after and greatly influenced by many of the breakthroughs toward understanding biological evolution that still hold sway today.

The analogous relationship that Steiner's description of the flow of culture has with biological evolution breaks in some significant ways from the theory of Darwin. Steiner was convinced of the existence of free will, and that this would, of course, have an essential effect on the history and evolving of humanity. This belief caused him to flatly reject the doctrine of natural selection. For Steiner, human beings cannot be correctly understood as merely the most accomplished, or furthest evolved, of the animals. The spiritual core of human beings, the ego, represents a gulf between humans and animals that could not adequately explain from this materialistic Darwinian standpoint. Ernst Haeckel, philosopher and best selling author on the subject of evolution in his day, developed the idea of Monism, a philosophical view which holds that there is unity to the universe, as opposed to dualism or pluralism. which Steiner championed. But his Monism was the complete opposite of Haeckel's, who felt that all is fundamentally matter: Steiner believed that all is fundamentally spirit (Lachman, 2007).

Steiner's rejection of natural selection within a broad acceptance of other components of evolutionary theory may be coming more into favour as of late. The idea of soft inheritance has gained significant ground in recent years with the development of the field of Epigenetics (Richards, 2006), which seems to show that organisms do in fact acquire environmentally influenced adaptive changes and pass them on to offspring. Perhaps it is time for educators to revisit in a new light the principle that Emerson stated

in his essay titled *History*:

Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history. ...all the facts of history pre exist in the mind as laws. Each law in turn is made by circumstances predominant, and the limits of nature give power to but one at a time. A man is the whole encyclopaedia of facts. The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn, and Egypt, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Britain, America, lie folded already in the first man. Epoch after epoch, camp, kingdom, empire, republic, democracy, are merely the application of his manifold spirit to the manifold world. (Emerson, 1841, p 237).

The maxim that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, which can be described as the belief that the development of an individual member of a species follows the biological and/or historical development of the entire species, is probably unfamiliar to most modern educators. It was used to explain phenomena in nineteenth century Biology, and arose from Aristotle's Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy, 1964). In Steiner's day, its enunciation as a curriculum theory was closely identified with both the German and American disciples of Herbart (Kliebard, 2004). Although the approach has fallen out of popular favour, it holds the appeal of sequencing curricula so as to suit the nature of the child.

Steiner's approach to this theory differed from other applications in educational settings. His view was holistic, rather than reductionistic, not only in the sense of educating the head, heart and hands, but also the soul and spirit. As applied in Waldorf education, it can be summarised as follows: The process of maturation of each child's consciousness is a recapitulation of the cultural epochs of all Humanity. This perception can guide us toward a proper sequence, timing and method for teaching each subject.

According to Steiner, the "super-sensible and eternal" aspect of the human being incarnates gradually and in a specific fashion. the methods and curricula

should derive from and be in accordance with what is known about this process of incarnation. And because the human being is seen to incarnate over a period of years, education must address this progression of development (Barnes, 1980).

In the broad sense, this is addressed in Waldorf through the acknowledgement of and working with the seven year stages referred to above. In a more specific sense, though, Steiner used his understanding of the incarnation process to sketch a travel plan for the journey a class teacher takes with her or his class through the primary school years.

Stephen Sagarin, editor of the *Research Bulletin for Waldorf Education*, observes that many writers on Waldorf education treat these stages of development as if they were universal, when Steiner himself repeatedly stated that he was describing something that, although historically and culturally true, was not true everywhere and for all time (Sagarin, 2009).

Sloan (1983) reminds us that any conception of educational stages must stand constantly ready to be re-evaluated and revised in the light of new evidence from any field of research. He argues that Waldorf education is not faith, nor was it created ready-made by Rudolf Steiner, to be preserved in perpetuity. Such a conception of education must as a whole remain open and subject to revision. Waldorf education is an evolving model of educational thinking, research and practice, and must be created anew in each application if it is not to devolve into prescription or dogma.

Whatever shortcomings might be present in the implementation of this approach, it seems to me to make significant advances over the ways in which curricula are presently established. When an anthroposophist looks at a child, she sees the entire history of mankind. The interpretation of that vision into a curricular sequence is by its very nature child-centred, as well as being “a curriculum comprising interrelated parts rather than isolated entities” (Kliebard, 2004). An unfortunate aspect of traditional

schools of education is that, though the study of child development is a significant part of teacher preparation, it is to a great degree isolated from curriculum and pedagogy (Goral, 2009). As a contrast to this state of affairs, Steiner's perspective is clear:

To find the right curriculum for children ages seven to fourteen or fifteen is bound up in general with a true knowledge of child development over this period of time (Steiner, 1919d).

#### 2.1.4 Curricular Overview

The ideas and theories of child development, and human development more generally, that arise from anthroposophical research are used as guidelines upon which a curriculum can be created. Though Easton (1995) claimed that almost everything distinctive in present-day Steiner schools originates from Rudolf Steiner himself, that is not to say that his ideas are prescriptive. In fact, many authors see adaptability as a key note to this educational approach. Consequently, there is not one defined curriculum for the schools in the Waldorf movement (Rawson & Master, 1997). The bulk of Steiner's plans for what would be taught in the first school were shared with teachers over just three weeks of lectures in the days leading up to the opening day, and individual teachers are given responsibility to work out the translation from broad curricular indications to specific lessons. Historically, much that has been used successfully in individual classrooms is shared with colleagues: within each school through teachers' meetings, and throughout the movement by way of journals and books, as well as at professional development conferences. The most broadly successful of these become common practice, and consequently, influence teacher training programmes, and are taught to people hoping to become teachers.

In many ways, then, the evolution it undergoes is not different from the Irish School system. The 1999 Primary School Curriculum

incorporates current educational thinking and the most innovative and effective pedagogical practice. It represents a process of revision that is both evolutionary



and developmental [...] designed to cater for the needs of children in the modern world (DES, 1999).

What is unique about the Waldorf approach, however, is the emphasis placed on the living quality of the curriculum. Steiner teachers cannot simply repeat lessons previous taught successfully by other teachers. The substance that the teachers in Waldorf schools consider to be most essential in their delivery to the children is not information or even skills, but imaginative pictures. When, for instance, the theme is Botany, the teacher might help the children to imagine a field of sunflowers. The ecological system including land that has been cultivated through the farmer's labours and hard-won knowledge; the life process involved the growing and metamorphosing plant throughout its life cycle; the unique way in which a field of sunflowers turn to face the rising sun, and track its path through the sky by twisting on their stems in concert: any of these themes or many others could be built up through word pictures. Steiner teachers believe that the nourishment for the imagination is of similar importance to the physical nourishment, such as one would derive, to complete the analogy, from actually eating sunflower seeds. An imaginative picture can change with the growing child, whereas a definition can only act like a mosaic, with each section building up to a static picture. These living pictures can only come about if the teachers own imagination is actively engaged. For this reason, an excellent lesson by one teacher, if copied exactly by another, may well fall flat. Waldorf teachers must be truly interested in and enthusiastic toward the subjects they cover, and must actively research the themes. This is one reason why textbooks are of such little use in Waldorf classrooms.

A result of the freedom in the educational approach, as well as the autonomy and creativity in the curriculum design may be greater career fulfilment for educators. To create an environment where such an approach can thrive, the ethos of Waldorf schools places great value on the consciousness of individual ethics, human solidarity, freedom and responsibility (Zech, 2009). This goes against the trend, experienced all through the last century and continuing now, both in Ireland and internationally, for heavier regulation and homogeneity of both teaching content and methods in National Schools (Angus, 2001).

There is of course a curriculum for Waldorf schools, though according to the Curriculum Commission established by the Pedagogical Section of the Anthroposophical Society, it can more accurately be considered 'suggestions' for the development of classroom teaching, as Steiner gave only 'indications' in his lectures (Zimmermann et al., 1994). Nonetheless, without denying its special history and unique qualities, a great many of the books that have been written on Waldorf or Steiner Education refer to the specific curriculum that is employed in these schools (Stockmeyer, 1969. Heydebrand, 1986, Finser, 1994, Schwartz, 1999, Rawson & Richter, 2000, Masters, 2007).

An obstructionist might argue then that the agreement entered into by the Irish Department of Education's New Schools Advisory Group and representatives from Lifeways, the Steiner schools' patron, to exclusively implement the Primary School Curriculum while being permitted to retain their essential character and ethos, is in fact an oxymoronic concept, impossible to achieve.

What is important to note, however, is that the specific subject matter that is taught in the classroom is not fixed into a specific formula. In fact, the Waldorf methodology requires that both the content itself and the way it is brought - the sequence, the areas of focus, the amount of time spent on a given subject – all need to 'evolve' through research by the individual teacher, in consultation with her or his colleagues.

This is true in countless small ways, but also quite dramatic ones. Substantial aspects of the curriculum practised in the first Waldorf schools of middle Europe, England and the eastern part of the United States have been revised so fundamentally over the years as to look completely different from earlier days (Heydebrand, 1986, Rawson & Masters, 1997).

Partially these changes have come about to meet the needs of a changing world. In the upper school, stenography gave way to typing and then computer literacy (Zimmermann et al., 1994). The study of Greek and Latin has been exchanged for more contemporary and often less Eurocentric languages (Rawson & Richter, 2000).

In part, the changes are due to the changing needs of the children who attend the schools, and perhaps even the changing nature of childhood itself. It is undoubtedly true that phenomena have appeared over the past fifty years that are without historic precedence, and that the long term effects of hospital childbirth, day care that separates an infant from his mother for many hours at a time, television and the erosion of child play are unknown but worrisome (Pearce, 1992). There is much anecdotal evidence that children arrive at school with less developed imaginative faculties and shorter attention spans. Education must not only meet this reality but, to the degree that it is possible, ameliorate it (Willby, 2005).

One last cause of change in the Waldorf curriculum is due to the impositions placed on schools (both state sponsored and independent) by governments. In recent years, assessment of children's learning outcomes has reached unprecedented levels. This will be explored in the Common Threads and Critical Debates section of this chapter.

The adaptability of the Waldorf approach is built into its structure - not just the curriculum, but also the way in which schools are formed and organised. Each is unique and, with rare exception, have their genesis in parents looking for this education in their home town, whether Sacramento, Soweto or Sligo.

To meet the need, as already mentioned, the schools must be culturally relevant. Brien Masters, director of the London Waldorf teacher training programme and advisor to new schools around the world, commented after visiting a Waldorf school in Israel.

It is a matter of discovering, researching, studying collegially and adapting to the social cultural, political, geographic and economic variables but so that the archetypal form of the education would still be undistortedly and life-givingly Waldorf (Masters, 2007, p 111).

The Waldorf curriculum can be seen as having both a vertical (depth) and horizontal (breadth) aspect, structured in such a way as to allow an integration of all subjects within larger themes. These motifs can encompass an entire school year, or, on a smaller scale, give a structure to the series of lessons. The choices for *what* and *when* arise from

an understanding of child development (Clouder & Rawson, 1998). The class teacher throughout the primary years is responsible for a two-hour main lesson each morning, and usually two or more lessons later in the day. The main lesson is a concentrated series of lessons, usually 15 to 25 sequential school days in duration, often referred to as a block, focused on one core subject but integrating several creative modalities of learning such as gross and fine motor movement, music and drama, and visual arts (Sliwka, 2008). This horizontal integration of artistic, academic and skills-based instructional approaches is an essential quality in the educational process, as it enables students to engage the full range of their faculties at every stage of development, so as to help achieve what can be considered a well-rounded yet fundamental maturity at each stage (Barnes, 1991).

Also beneficial to teaching practice is this: by devoting an extended period to developing a variety of activities around a single theme, teachers can strive for a balance between focused and less concentrated work within these lessons, creating a rhythm that is analogous to breathing (Steiner, 1919b, Rawson & Masters, 1997).

A particular main lesson core theme lasts usually for three or four weeks, and many of these are revisited periodically throughout the school years. Geography, for example, is introduced in Class Four and continued each year as a main lesson block until graduation. This vertical integration of curricular themes can be seen as an ascending spiral from year to year (Barnes, 1991, Rawson & Richter, 2000), and this rhythm of focused attention, followed by leaving a subject area to rest, then taking it up again after time has elapsed, arises from Rudolf Steiner's theories of cognition, where 'forgetting' plays an important role in the learning process (Steiner, 1919b). Rudolf Steiner appears to be the only modern pedagogue who emphasizes the value of teachers building an awareness of the importance of this process into their methods.

Similar to the traditional agricultural practice of letting a field go fallow, creating a rhythm of intense learning, then a time for the experiences to recede into the background, to be 'forgotten', and then later revisited and further developed, helps with lifelong retention of experiences (Steiner, 1919b). Perhaps the analogy could be

improved upon by replacing the idea of fallow (defined as *not in use; inactive*) with an image of crop rotation, where thoughts and experiences are worked through the active subconscious or even active unconscious.

Steiner argued a connection between this curricular periodicity process, and the consolidation of memory where novel experiences are transformed from a relatively fragile condition to a more robust and stable state during periods of sleep, a currently held theory in sleep research (Fischer et al., 2002).

These themes are taken in rotation, throughout the primary years. Each time that a given subject is 're-awakened' in a subsequent block, it is introduced on a higher level. When the class returns to a theme again after time has passed, it is like meeting it again on a higher loop of the spiral. For obvious reasons, this functions best when there is continuity with a particular class grouping carried by an individual class teacher year upon year, rather than a group of teachers specialising in one level, and just passing the children on annually. Appropriately, this educational practice is commonly known as looping.

Within a main lesson block, there is also a staged approach to working with content that avails of this learning/forgetting/remembering dynamic, that can be seen over the course of a three day sequence. On the first day, some aspect of the main lesson is devoted to new material or original experiences, whether, depending on the age, a demonstration, story or a picture. The second day, that material is reviewed and discussed further, and the children are invited to express creatively individuated learning outcomes. This can also be a time to expand awareness by posing often playful and imaginative questions about the previous days content. On the third and final day of a sequence, the same material is reviewed again, and the essence of the matter is brought out in a concrete way through leading the children to written or artistic work. This is seen as a further development toward the conceptual realm. This can often involve a guided synthesis process with experiences not only from two days previous, but with content and experiences for the spiralling curriculum (Lissau, 2004, Rawson & Richter, 2000).

The horizontal part of the curriculum is found predominantly in the shorter subject lessons that follow the main lesson, where 'foreign' languages, games, practical skills and artistic work continue uninterrupted throughout the years. At every stage of development, they enable the pupils' engagement to the full range of their faculties. In Steiner Waldorf education, the arts are recognised as fundamental to a holistic education; a central method of curriculum delivery rather than an adjunct curriculum (Sliwka, 2008).

To go into any detail about the vast scope of subject lessons traditionally explored in Waldorf primary schools is beyond the range of this project. It should be noted, though, that most of it is distinct from the Primary School Curriculum. Consequently, the Steiner National Schools are currently faced with a serious question of what to sacrifice; clearly it will not all fit into discretionary curriculum time.

Whereas one looks to the vertical aspect of the curriculum to find the recapitulation of cultural history, this can be seen not only within the grand scale of themes for each year (Old Testament, Norse Mythology, Ancient Greece, etc.) but also in myriad smaller schemes employed throughout each year.

An example of how this guiding principle is applied in practice would be found in the introduction to literacy. The forms of our alphabet originated, in the distant past, from hieroglyphs, pictograms, and ideograms, designating aspects and attributes of the phenomenal world. Only over the course of millennia did these symbols lose their connection to the things they described, and become purely abstract representations of phonemes (König, 2002).

The introduction of written letters in the Waldorf class one is done in an artistic and imaginative way so as to recreate this transition between the picture script of nature and the abstract symbols of the alphabet. From a story told one day, a consonant character will be derived from a picture drawn to illustrate the tale the following day (working with the 3 day rhythm). For example, the big brown bear can be drawn to resemble a capital "B," a golden goose might reveal the letter "G." The teacher draws or paints the

illustration in which the letter is embedded in front of children, modelling and articulating the creative process, which they will later emulate. One the third day, the letter itself is 'discovered' within the picture, and drawn on its own. Teaching the letters thus, one becomes sensitive to the subtle connections between sound, meaning, and the pictorial forms of letters (Ward, 2003).

### 2.1.5 The Inner Attitude of the Teacher: Teacher as Researcher

As addressed previously, the Waldorf approach requires that curricular content, presentation, sequence, and focus all 'evolve' over time. This allows for the creative integration of teaching methods and materials by the individual class teacher, based on her or his own judgement, who is required to draw on an in-depth and up-to-date knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop, for the good of the specific group of children in her or his care (Sturbaum, 1997, Sliwka, 2008). The only way for this process to succeed is if, in addition to an expansive repertoire of skills to nurture learning appropriately, the individuals who are responsible for teaching each unique group of children conduct research in the classroom. Though research on school reform has shown that teachers involved with a specific school movement or philosophy have a commitment level less common in traditional settings (Wood, 1993), unusually high demands are placed on the Waldorf teacher (see interviews, section 4.1) Effective initial teacher training is an essential component of successful Waldorf teaching, though teacher education is not complete when the individual comes out of the institute. It continues throughout the teaching career, so the school's role in ongoing professional development is integral. Honest self-reflection on performance: independently, with colleagues, and during continuing profession development is crucial.

The centrality of the relationship between the child and teacher in learning is a key characteristic in the Waldorf approach, and more significance is placed on this fact than in other educational approaches. In the final year of his life, Rudolf Steiner gave a sequence of lectures to doctors, therapist, and teachers who were interested in the

education of people with special needs. His words show how emphatically he held this belief:

For you have no idea how unimportant is all that the teacher says or does not say on the surface, and how important what he himself is as teacher (Steiner, 1924a, p. 43).

In cultivating as close to an ideal relationship as possible, the teacher strives to be worthy of the child's emulation. A natural response then is for the child to recognise the true authority of the teacher. This authority comes about as a direct result of the teacher's engagement with the individual children and through her or his creative involvement with the subject material of the lessons (Masters, 1983, Finser, 1995). Rudolf Steiner admonished against preaching to cure a child of an undesirable habit. He rather encouraged the teacher to find an undesirable habit in oneself, and to set about curing it. The inner strength engendered by striving toward a truly moral posture would, he said, help the child far more than moralising.

Although there are several models of reflective practice used by Waldorf teachers to draw lessons out of their experiences, the contemplative use of meditation is considered to be an essential analysis tool. Steiner spoke to the teachers thusly:

Once we have gone through the process of developing spiritual forces from within, immediate links are formed between the child's soul and ours. Such human links are of the utmost importance for the child's moral guidance and for the development of his will.[...] Try to supplement the usual preparations of your lessons by an inward meditative preparation which, in itself, is unconnected with the content of the lessons to be taught, but which will lift up your soul. Let this meditative content evoke in you a stronger inner mood which will open your soul to the world. If you have practised such inner meditation in the evening and then strengthen it by going over it again, by re-experiencing it, the following morning, you will notice its effect as you enter your classroom. This may strike you as superstitious talk, but such matters should be put to the test, free from



bias or preconceived theories. Your own observations will confirm the truth, and that is all that matters ( Steiner, 1920 b, p. 94).

Waldorf teaching challenges the individual to develop both professionally and personally through a process of self-education. Steiner believed that steadfast meditative practice would lead to the development of latent capacities of clairvoyance that he claimed to have developed in himself. The idea of inner development in Waldorf communities seems loosely defined, but there is an emphasis on strengthening the individual ego, described by Steiner as the eternal kernel of the human soul. He rejected many late nineteenth century spiritualist techniques such as seances, mesmerism, somnambulism, and automatic writing, not because they were ineffective, but because they strengthened atavistic attributes that would no longer serve societal development. I would assume that many practices of the New Age movement of recent decades would be rejected by him as well.

It is clear that the practice of anthroposophy, in some form, is a requirement to be a teacher using the Waldorf method. As belief in the existence of a spiritual world is an essential tenet of Anthroposophy, it could be argued that those who determinedly reject its existence would be unsuited to teach using Waldorf methods. Few Waldorf teachers adopt the title of Anthroposophist, no more than teachers working in an Applied Behaviour Analysis school consider themselves Behaviourists. But just as someone who rejects the behaviourist approach would be out of place employing ABA methods in an ABA classroom, it would be equally strange for a teacher who rejects the fundamental validity of a spiritual scientific approach to knowledge to seek to work as a Waldorf teacher.

In addition to all the time and activities directly relating to the primary directive of educating the children, Waldorf teachers often spend an extraordinary amount of time in school management work. In addition to two or more meeting days before and after the school year, a teacher at an independent Waldorf school might be expected to plan, prepare for, and participate in faculty retreats, weekly teachers' meeting, weekly College of Teachers meetings, committee meetings for groups such as Festivals Committee,

Care Group, Enrolment Group, and Finance Committee, plus co-mentoring meetings, parent/class meetings, all school meetings, and representative to the Board of Management. Traditional Waldorf teachers devote a much higher percentage of their time to meetings with colleagues than is the case in national schools. The non-hierarchical structure common to Waldorf schools necessitates group decision making processes that would in national schools be made by the principal teacher.

During preparation for teachers who would inaugurate the Waldorf school, Rudolf Steiner gave this advice after delivering a series of lectures outlining curriculum.

I would like you to stick firmly to the following four principles. First teachers must make sure that they influence and work on their pupils, in a broader sense, by allowing the spirit to flow through their whole being as teachers, and also in the details of their work: how each word is spoken, and how each concept of feeling is developed. Teachers must be people of initiative. Teachers must never be careless or lazy; they must, at every moment, stand in full consciousness of what they do in the school and how they act toward the children. This is the first principle. The teacher must be a person of initiative in everything done, great and small....The teacher should be one who is interested in the being of the whole world and of humanity...the teacher must be one who never compromises in the heart and mind with what is untrue...The teacher must never get stale or grow sour (Steiner, 1919d).

### 2.1.6 Waldorf Adapted to an Irish context

According to spiritual teachings, each race or ethnic group has a kind of folk-soul that interacts with those people, lending them unique characteristics that affect the karma and destiny of tribes, races, and nations. From a modern Steinerian point of view, rather than a matter of race or genetics, a unifying folk-soul exists for people who reside together in a particular geographic setting. If a person moves from one country to another, she or he is under the influence of the folk soul of the new country (Kellman, Schmitt-Stegman & Staley, 1996). In that sense, it can be looked upon as the living

heritage of a particular culture. Waldorf education is created in such a way as to adopt and adapt itself to that cultural heritage, to be in relationship with the folk soul of each area where schools are established.

The history of Waldorf Education in Ireland is relatively short and sparse. We can consider both the actual schools that exist and the literature about the approach as applied specifically in Ireland.

#### 2.1.6.1 Independent Schools

Application of the educational approach derived from the ideas of Rudolf Steiner has a fifty-seven year history in Ireland, when one includes the North. If one were to consider only the Republic of Ireland, there have been Steiner inspired schools here for thirty-two years. Ireland, both Northern and the Republic, is exceptional in the application of Rudolf Steiner's ideas in practical initiatives, in that it is the only region in which the Camphill Movement pre-dates and is larger than the Waldorf Movement.

The first Camphill Community was founded by students of Steiner's who had fled Austria in 1935 and relocated to Aberdeen, Scotland who sought to live with, care for and educate children with special needs. From this group would evolve the Camphill Movement, growing to more than ninety-five communities in twenty-two countries around the world. Besides its proximity to Camphill's birthplace, another reason for the popularity of these communities here has been the government's early and continuing recognition of their worth, and the financial support that arises from that recognition.

Glencraig Camphill Community Curative School started as a community and residential school for children with special needs in a large mansion near Belfast in 1954. As the first Camphill Community in Ireland, it was the first organised application of Rudolf Steiner's educational ideas here. The pedagogical approach is based on indications from Steiner, and therefore can rightly be considered a modified Waldorf approach. In fact, Steiner gave an entire training course for people who wished to work with children with additional educational needs (Steiner, 1924a).

Until the 1970s, there was no right to education in Northern Ireland for children with special needs who were deemed by the schools as 'ineducable'. For two decades Camphill Glencraig provided the only public education option available to all handicapped children. Also at that time, all other schools in Northern Ireland were segregated by religion and by gender.

The Hollywood Rudolf Steiner School in Co. Down began in 1975 as the first Waldorf school in Ireland for normally abled children. When formed, it was the only religiously integrated primary school in the North. Some years later, it chose not to join the nascent All Children Together integrated schools movement, as the Hollywood Steiner School community rejects profiling as a means of confirming pupil ratios that reflect community populations as yet another form of religious discrimination.

Following an impulse to address finances in a new way, families contributed according to their ability to pay, and teachers received salary amounts based on their needs. This system served the community for the first decade, and then was replaced with a more standardised system, but one that still provides significant bursaries to low income families, as is a feature of other Waldorf schools in Ireland and worldwide (Hollywood Steiner, n.d.).

In 1979 Ballytobin, near Kilkenny, became the first Camphill Community to work with disabled children in the Republic of Ireland. Using a modified Waldorf curriculum, it is the first and only school in the country, Waldorf or otherwise, which integrates children without special needs into an educational setting primarily created for children with special needs, an arrangement the providers and parents have found to be very beneficial for both groups of children.

The next Waldorf school was established in the West of the country. Raheen Wood Steiner School was originally Cooleenbridge Waldorf School, and started in Feakle, County Clare in 1986. The school attracted a significant number of families to the East Clare area, from other parts of Ireland as well as internationally. After eight years, the

school moved to Raheen Woods near Tuamgraney, and changed its name to that of the location.

The first Waldorf school in Dublin was established in 1987 in a house on Templeogue Road. Within a year it had moved to Rathmines and stayed there for the next decade until, needing more space, the community relocated to a rural setting near Kilcullen in Kildare. Unlike most of the other Waldorf schools, both in Ireland and internationally, Kildare Steiner School has a policy of class teachers specialising in a particular age range, and passing the children along as they progress through the school.

Also in Clare, Mol an Óige was formed by a group in Ennistymon in 2005 and has a unique history from the other Waldorf Schools in Ireland. It was the first school established with the hope of becoming a National School. As such, the initial intention was to cover the Irish Primary Curriculum using a Waldorf approach, and the school hired its teachers in the knowledge and expectation that they would be required to have the appropriate credentials if recognition was granted. With enrolment short of the required seventeen for recognition as a new national school, it did not apply until the following year.

The website for the Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association lists twenty preschools/kindergartens which cater to the under seven year olds employing Waldorf methods (ISKA, n.d.). Many of these have hopes to start a full primary school in the future.

Until recently, virtually all of the funding to run the schools came from tuition fees paid by parents and philanthropic fund raising efforts. By far the greatest cost of running a school is salaries of employees. Waldorf schools in the Republic of Ireland have traditionally paid their teachers about 50% less than primary teachers in the state system. Although the majority of Waldorf teachers in those schools lack state recognised credentials, many (though not all) have gone through an equally rigorous, alternative Waldorf teacher training. Also, a number of the teachers employed in the

independent schools *do* have state qualifications, but choose to teach in these alternative communities.

Some economists within the Waldorf movement believe that the only way to bring the schools back to their original mission to educate children of all economic strata is through achieving an income stream of gift money from the corporate sector, without restrictions on how the money is used (Lamb, 2004). Others feel it is the role of government to fund the people's education, and the compromises invariably imposed on schools by the state should be borne.

A unique aspect of the Irish educational system is that the government provides *for* primary education, rather than providing the education itself. One way Waldorf enthusiasts see things is to say that the education itself is free, but to create a proper environment in which to educate entails significant expenses.

#### 2.1.6.2 National Schools

In 1995 Cooleenbridge Waldorf School sought and was refused recognition by the Department of Education. A high court case was brought against the government, asking for recognition and full funding support for Cooleenbridge. If won, the decision would have paved the way for other Waldorf Schools in the Republic to apply for the same. Although they lost the case for funding, the school was granted recognition, and the state was required to pay the school's legal fees. The Court upheld the state's right to require that schools employ state-trained teachers (or equivalent) who speak fluent Irish (Raheen Wood, n.d.).

Meanwhile, in the North, Camphill Glenraig was engaged in battles with its own government. After many inspections by the educational boards, and changes as a result of these, including employing only state trained teachers, the school was recognized in the 1990s. There are now two essential elements to the curriculum at Glenraig: the Waldorf Curriculum and the Northern Ireland Curriculum (Camphill Glenraig , n.d.).

The future of Ballytobin Special School is uncertain. Its application to the Department of Education in 2003 for recognition was refused, on the grounds that 1) their system of reverse integration is considered inappropriate for the normally abled children and 2) a number of teachers employed at the school lack state recognised teacher qualifications. The Health Service Executive are not filling day places at Ballytobin because they are concerned about the non-recognised status of the school, and residential placement of children is a policy of last resort. To meet this situation, families have begun to form a more traditional Waldorf school in the same area (Camphill Ballytobin, n.d.).

In 2008 the Department of Education & Science granted provisional recognition to Raheen Wood Steiner National School and Mol an Óige Steiner National School, two new primaries that would employ only state trained teachers and implement the primary school curriculum through the Waldorf model of education.

Mol an Óige made a clean break with the past. After receiving provisional recognition, the independent Steiner School closed at the end of that school year, to make room for the Steiner National School opening two months later. Unlike Raheen Wood National School, Mol an Óige asks for no tuition contributions from parents (Mol an Óige, n.d.).

Raheen Wood had a more complicated transition, For the next two years, the old, privately funded school operated some classes in the same building. As these children graduated out of the school, the teachers were replaced with new teachers with primary teaching qualifications, and the independent primary school ceased in June of 2010. An independent secondary school still operates on the premises, with sixteen pupils currently enrolled. (Raheen Wood, n.d.)

In the year following the award of provisional recognition to the two Waldorf schools in County Clare, the Kildare school community reached a decision that they would not, in the near future, seek to become a national school. Although the finances at the school have at times been precarious, the Board of Trustees agreed with many of the parents that the requirement to replace any currently employed teachers who do not hold state recognised credentials with teachers who do was a fundamentally unfair aspect to the

agreement made by their sister schools, and one to which it could not give its consent. (Kildare Steiner, n.d.)

### 2.1.6.3 Irish Literature

When searching for literature on the re-envisioning of the Waldorf curriculum to meet the modern Irish context, very little was found. Because the Waldorf movement is in its relative infancy in Ireland, very little has been published about applying this educational approach in a culturally adjusted way. There are no books either for educators or for general readership that focus on this topic. A search of doctoral and masters theses from both Ireland and the United Kingdom drew only two addressing Steiner Education in Ireland. The amount of research into the curriculum in these was negligible.

There are no regularly published professional journals for Waldorf teachers in Ireland. The Journal of the Anthroposophical Society in Ireland has never in its 15 year history published an article on the theme of the Waldorf curriculum, let alone national adaptations to it. There has been an occasional article over the years in one or another of the Waldorf periodicals from the UK, but these are usually brief profiles of particular schools, and none that focus on the curriculum.

Nonetheless, thousands of children have been educated using these methods, so curricular research has certainly been carried out, if not published. The recognition of two schools by the government has brought up the need to document what is done, but this has so far progressed slowly. (See the interviews with the teachers in those schools, section 4.1.)

The Waldorf approach to education gives scant importance to the use of textbooks in the classroom. The teacher chooses the content, methods and timing of the lessons, and those lessons are experienced by the children as arising out of the teacher, through her or his own research and life experience. Printed reference media, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc., as well as online and other digital sources, are appropriately used,



though in conjunction with the teachers' lesson content. For the older children. independent research on agreed themes is required (Rawson & Richter, 2000).

I do not consider it necessary to renew educational science as such because of already existing excellent pedagogical ideas and principles. But I do believe it to be of the utmost importance to infuse new life into the art of education (Steiner, 1920b, p. 87).

## 2.2 An Overview of Irish Primary Education

In this section I intend to give an overview of the Irish Primary Curriculum, its philosophical underpinnings and the unique attributes that hold sway in Ireland, distinct from those prevalent in other countries.

Like the primary curriculum of any other country, Ireland's is made up of a distillation of what has over the years been perceived to be best practices, combined with the political intent of numerous influential organisations and agencies (NCCA, 2010). Examples of the latter are health education dealing with issues like obesity, or child abuse prevention curricula such as the Stay Safe Programme. Change in school directives is almost always an additive process - very rarely are teachers told to stop teaching subjects. This leads to a process of incremental growth, rather than an evolution of principle.

Educational policy making is ultimately the prerogative of the government; specifically the cabinet member designated as having particular responsibility for education. The Minister of the Department of Education and Skills (known as the Department of Education from 1921 to 1997, and as the Department of Education and Science until 2010) is responsible to Dail Eireann for all actions of civil servants, making the Department fundamentally conservative, and changes very slow in coming (Harris, 1989). Continuity of leadership within the Department is limited. An extreme example of this fact occurred during the years of 1981 and 1982, when there were six ministers for Education.

Political forces clearly shape curriculum thinking and development. Notions of core, common and national curricula all seem rooted in the belief that children should be prepared for service to the state, or at least to fill their allotted societal roles. The Welsh Office of the U.K. Department of Education and Science stated this most cogently in a booklet on curriculum development in schools.

“Since school education prepares the child for adult life, the way in which the school helps him to develop his potential must also be related to his subsequent needs and responsibilities as an active member of our society.” (DES,UK 1981, intro)

Easton (1995) argues that Waldorf education is based entirely upon the child and her or his development, without specific regard for the supposed needs of society. This observation leads him to conclude that the term "education," which in Latin means *leading forth* is truly applicable to Waldorf education, while the term "learning" should properly be used to describe most other educational systems.

### 2.2.1 A Brief History of Primary Education in Ireland

During the Medieval period Ireland provided some of the finest educational centres in Europe, the great monastic schools serving as repositories of Western culture during Europe's dark ages. Ireland's concern and regard for education helped to preserve and transmit much of the cultural heritage of the people (Coolahan, 1981).

The monastic culture of the middle ages in Ireland saved much of the writings, and consequently the ideas and ideals, of the ancient world. While libraries all over mainland Europe were being burned in the sacking of cities, monks were busy in scriptoria handcopying books and adding beautiful illuminated illustrations to the text. The western world would have lost vast portions of collective knowledge in the fields of philosophy, biology, mathematics, and the classics if not for the work of these men and the Church that supported them (Cahill, 1996) .

Perhaps pre-dating these, and existing beside them, were the Bardic schools, which existed in Ireland from the first millennia down to the smashing of the Irish intelligentsia in about the middle of the seventeenth century. The subjects studied by students of the Bardic schools were Brehon law, history and genealogy of Ireland, and native language and literature. In a largely oral tradition that depended on memorisation, the poet tutors composed verse for laws, genealogy, calendars of saints, and history.

When the Bardic schools at last became Christian, they did not become monastic. They were lay schools, existing parallel to education in the ecclesiastical schools. Ireland, unlike most of her neighbours, had an educational tradition outside the Church.

From the early days of the Tudor conquest, English policy aimed to use schooling to promote the use of the English language and the Protestant faith (Coolahan, 1981). In response to the penal laws in the late seventeenth century, hedge schools arose to meet the educational needs of Irish Catholics. These were replaced by a British-financed national school system in 1831. The churches (Catholic and Anglican) insisted on the right to educate their own members and, by the time of independence, virtually all education in Ireland was under clerical control. Both the hedge schools and the later national schools taught in English, as the Catholic Church and Irish political leaders such as Daniel O'Connell encouraged linguistic anglicisation, which provided the most economic opportunity for most Irish people. The Irish language was criticised as “backward”, while English was seen as the language of the future (Coolahan, 1981). Thus English became the lingua franca of Ireland.

Elements within the Catholic Church did a complete turnaround on the subject of Gaelic when they saw the political opportunity in supporting the campaign to do so, and somewhat disingenuously embraced the neo-Gaelic revivalist movement (Garvin, 2004). Although the Catholic Church advocated the Gaelic policy, it insisted as well that Latin, Greek and religious knowledge would be taught in the schools, even at the expense of science, modern foreign languages, history, geography, and the social sciences (Garvin, 2004).

In the new Irish Free State, allowing the Catholic Church to continue to provide education for the vast majority of children suited the goals of the young government. The underground Dáil of 1919 had no Department of Education. The idea of priests controlling education, perhaps because it reflected their own background, seemed to them 'natural, inevitable, and desirable' (Garvin, 2004).

This original curriculum of the new state was primarily based on the 3 R's plus Irish; abandoned were such subjects as drawing and manual training. Nature study and rural science were made optional in 1934, to make more room for Gaelic, resulting in a huge drop in the number of schools teaching these subjects (Garvin, 2004).

The limitations on curricular breadth resulting from the pre-eminent position afforded the language was, to a degree, acknowledged at the time (Coolahan, 1981, Kelly, 2002). This curriculum was criticised by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (1947) for its narrowness and rigidity, and the 1954 Council for Education report on the primary school called for drawing, nature study and physical education as obligatory subjects – though this recommendation was not taken up.

From the first years of independence until the early 1960s, those responsible for the primary curriculum pursued an ideology of cultural nationalism through the promotion of Irish Gaelic in the schools, an attempted cultural revolution to re-establish the country's vernacular (Coolahan, 1989). This Gaelic policy had a deleterious effect on the level of achievement pupils reached in other core subjects as well. In his 1966 assessment of bilingualism in Irish Education, McNamara (1966) points out that the devotion to Gaelic resulted in lower skill levels, in both English and Arithmetic, when comparing children educated in Ireland to those educated in England.

The limiting impact this policy had on other developments in the field of primary education is more difficult to appraise, although it was raised as an issue in the Dáil in 1966 (Kelly, 2002).

The key concern was to keep the system operating with minimum upheaval (Coolahan, 1989). Garvin describes the culture that informed educational policy in the first thirty

years of the Republic as 'extreme conservatism, combined with an atmosphere of obstructive authoritarianism that sometimes verged on a very Irish kind of genial terrorism' (2004, p. 195). Education was greatly valued, but an accompanying fostering of unorthodox opinions was not.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Academic chairs in Education lay vacant at Irish universities: at UCD for sixteen years; at UCC for seven years; and at Maynooth for twelve years. This clearly reflects the consensus in academia at the time that education was the province of religious clerics.

Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Education, said he did not see that he had a duty "to philosophise on educational matters" (1956). Six years earlier, in his first term as Minister, Mulcahy had said, "In the world of today advance of knowledge has led to endless destruction and misery" (Gov. of Ireland, 1950, p12).

Between 1945 and 1965, a shift in popular opinion and a gradual collapse in the resistance of clerics toward the concept of a generally educated and secular society took place. 'In spite of gross neglect' of educational advancement since the War years, even while other countries in Europe were investing heavily in education (Sweeney, 1998, p104-105), there was a dramatic qualitative turnaround achieved from the late 1960s that continued. In 1967, abolishment of the Primary Certificate exam (in Irish, English and Arithmetic) allowed more variety of subjects to be taught in the classroom, though some post-primary schools began to require entrance exams.

The 1971 Primary Curriculum was significantly influenced by the findings of the Plowden Report, a thorough analysis of primary education policy in England in 1966. The keynotes of the new approach were purposeful activity, pupil mobility, flexibility of deployment, freedom, expanded range of subjects, integrated, heuristic teaching methodology, with small group and individual teaching, and also close links between schools and local environment (including trips to explore the historical, geographical, and botanical heritage of the region) (Coolahan, 1989).

The main intention of the new curriculum was create a varied and flexible school programme, with the child and his interests at the centre. As a result of its implementation, schools became more pleasant, interesting and humane. For instance, corporal punishment became less prominent feature, and in 1982 was formally abolished (Coolahan, 1989).

Until this era, there was a paucity of legislation on education. The First White Paper on Educational Development in the history of the state only came in 1980. One reason there was no White Paper previously was the lack of an overall plan. Pádraig Faulkner, Minister for Education in 1972 presented it in a different light: “There is nothing of such a complicated nature in our policy that would demand an elaborate White Paper to explain it.”

Another White Paper on Education (1995) preceded the passage of the The Education Act of 1998. This legislation represents a landmark in Ireland, as it provided, for the first time, a statutory framework for the education system, regulating all schools and centres for education. The Act sets out broad objectives and principles underpinning the education system and provides for the rights of children and others to education, by stating that there is a statutory duty on the Minister to ensure that appropriate education and support services are available to everyone. The needs of persons with special educational needs are more specifically addressed by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004. It also clarifies the roles and the responsibilities of teachers, Principals, school patrons, Boards of Management and the Minister. It seeks to provide a framework for the development of a supportive and dynamic working environment for teachers and school managers and to promote the development of partnership in education at school level and at national level, providing for consultation with teachers, parents, school patrons, and Boards of Management on a wide range of issues.

As of today, there are still very few schools that are not directly patroned by the Catholic Church, although there are many signs that this will change.

Though always representing a numerical minority of the population, the Church of Ireland was the official state church until it was disestablished in 1871. Although the Constitution of Ireland from 1937 until it was amended in 1973 recognised the "special position" of the Catholic Church "as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens", the Church of Ireland received State funding to run a number of primary and secondary schools throughout the country, and it is the only one of the non Catholic patrons that operate a College of Education to train teachers for its schools.

In 1934, The Dublin Talmud Torah opened Zion National School in Bloomfield Avenue, Portobello, Dublin. On its re-location to Rathgar, in 1980, the newly amalgamated Jewish Primary School changed its name to the present Stratford National School. Although holding a Jewish ethos, the school enrolls pupils from a wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds (Stratford National School, n.d.).

The Islamic Foundation of Ireland is the patron for two national schools that reflect the values of the Islamic faith. The Muslim National School in Clonskeagh, Dublin was established in 1990, and the North Dublin Muslim National School in Cabra established in 2001. The ethos of the schools is distinctly Islamic. All of the pupils are of the Muslim faith. For the vast majority of pupils, English is not their first language (Muslim Schools of Ireland, n.d.). Children from 3rd class up perform midday prayer. The Qur'an, Deen and Arabic are taught by five part-time Muslim teachers. In addition to national and bank holidays, the schools have extended closures for Islamic festivals. The religious education programme of the schools covers a range of social and moral issues from an Islamic perspective (Islamic Foundation of Ireland, n.d.).

The John Scottus School is multi-denominational in Dublin, established by students of the School of Philosophy and Economic Science who wished their children to be educated through the same philosophical principles, primarily arising from the Advaita Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy. It is part of a network of less than a dozen similar but independent schools around the world who adhere to the same educational principles. A representative of the school informed me that the Primary School

Curriculum is followed. It was privately funded from 1986 to 1999, when it received Department of Education recognition and funding.

Gaelscoileanna provide primary education through an immersion environment in the Irish language that was, until recently, rarely available outside the Gaeltacht. Whereas the Gaelscoile movement shifts the linguistic medium, it offers no alternative vision to meeting the learning needs of children.

In 1978, the Dalkey School Project opened in Dun Laoghaire, the first multi-denominational school in the country. There are now 56 such Educate Together primary schools operating in the Republic of Ireland. Educate Together arises from a multi-denominational religious ethos. The only curricular distinction they make from earlier denominational patrons is in the area of Religion, both in the 30 minute lessons each day, and in any other ways an ethos of the main change that these schools bring about is on the administrative level. Nearly all of the newly built primary schools in areas of population growth are Gaelscoileanna or Educate Together Schools.

There are also a number of special schools - including residential care units and schools for children with disabilities, young offenders, children at risk, children with specific learning disabilities and emotionally disturbed children. The curriculum is often significantly modified in these schools, such as the Applied Behaviour Analysis approach for primary age children with Autism, but these schools only offer curricular adjustments for a small subset of the population identified as 'less abled' children.

In 2008, the Minister for Education requested that Dublin County Vocational Education Committee act as patron to two new primary schools in north Dublin, on an experimental basis. In 2010, three more schools were opened under the patronage of the V.E.C.s in Counties Dublin, Meath and Kildare. This is the first time in the history of the Irish State that primary education has been provided by a Government body. There are no indications that the V.E.C. envisions pedagogical changes beyond the Religion Curriculum.



Like the Jewish, Muslim, John Scottus and Educate Together schools before them, the new V.E.C. schools promise parental choice only as regards the religious/spiritual aspects of their children's education. Steiner Waldorf Education, if allowed a permanent place in state funded primary education, will be the first to use a unique set of fundamental principles, resulting in a truly distinct pedagogical approach.

## 2.2.2 Unique Attributes

Each sovereign country adopts its own form of education for its citizens, and there are a number of unique attributes to the Irish approach. More significant than any other is surely the role played by Irish Gaelic as a language of instruction in the schools. The structure and management of primary schools, in which the government cedes the provision of education to non state organisations is another singular element. Finally, when considering other state funded European schools, it would be rare to find any with provision for a religion curriculum.

### 2.2.2.1 Irish Gaelic and Cultural Nationalism

Education in Ireland involves forming young people and citizens with a specific Irish identity, and the way in which that identity was interpreted in the early days of the Republic by the dominant social groupings in education and society had as one of its cornerstones the everyday usage of Gaelic as the people's language (Drudy and Lynch, 1993).

Though the 1999 Primary Curriculum states that every Irish child has the right to an experience of both the Irish and English languages, it is clear that the original intention to turn Ireland back to a Gaelic speaking country through the education of its children has failed. The Government's 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language quotes the 2007 Harris Report stating that there was a fall of more than 36% in the numbers of pupils achieving mastery in the development of listening, vocabulary and comprehension skills between 1985 and 2002 (Gov. of Ireland, 2009).

This failure can partially be blamed on ineffective teaching. Recent inspections of schools have judged that Irish was taught to a good or very good standard in only half of the primary classrooms inspected, and just over half of the pupils were able to express themselves satisfactorily in Irish. Also, as of 2007, almost 25% of teachers in English medium schools rate their own standards of spoken Irish as weak. In fact, in one third of the classrooms inspected, Irish was taught through the medium of English (Gov. of Ireland, 2009).

However, the educational system should not take sole responsibility for the drop in Irish usage. It can also be said that the underlying principle of cultural nationalism has evolved, partially through the influence of policies that seek to embrace inclusivity and diversity. Despite the policies of successive Irish governments to promote the language, the decline in the number of native speakers within the Gaeltacht since independence has accelerated, although the number of those elsewhere in the country able to speak it has increased, albeit not as their primary language, and not to the extent that many had hoped. In the 2002 census, 140,000 more people classified themselves as Irish speakers than had been the case in the 1996 census.

From the mid-1940s onward the policy in all national schools of teaching English-speaking children exclusively through Irish whenever possible was abandoned. In the following decades, support for the language was progressively reduced. An ad-hoc "Language Freedom Movement," opposed to the compulsory teaching of Gaelic, was started in 1966, but largely faded away within a decade.

In 1973 the requirement to pass the Irish language examination in order to receive a school leaving certificate was rescinded, although virtually all students attending public schools must still be taught the language. Certain individual exemptions from learning Irish exist; these include pupils who have spent a significant period of time abroad or students with a learning difficulty.

In 2005 Enda Kenny, leader of the Fine Gael party, called for compulsory Irish to end at the Junior Certificate level, and for the language to be an optional subject for Leaving

Certificate students. Considerable comment was provoked by these statements, and the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, not himself a fluent Irish speaker, argued that it should remain compulsory, else it would lead to a drop in the number of people speaking the language (RTE News, 2005).

One month before assuming the role of Taoiseach, Kenny reiterated in a *Radio na Gaeltachta* interview that dropping Gaelic as a compulsory Leaving Certificate examination subject will be part of his government's plans. He went on to say that he was very much in favour of the Irish language, but as a compulsory subject it had clearly failed (Ó Caollaí, 2011). There have, as yet, been no statements by the new government concerning Gaelic instruction at primary level.

There is some evidence that the attention paid to Gaelic in the Irish school system has caused it to turn its back on the other languages of Europe and the world. The virtual cessation of teaching the classical languages of Greek and Latin during the 1960s did not result in a significant rise in the study of modern languages (Garvin, 2004). Statistics compiled by the European Union's Eurostat office show that fewer of Ireland's primary age children study a foreign language than any other EU country. As of 2008, the average across Europe was 78% of students engaged in study of a foreign language, whereas the number of Irish pupils is only 3%. If one were to ignore the label of 'foreign', and consider the numbers of children who study a third language at primary level, Ireland would still rank poorly: fifteenth out of the twenty countries for which there are statistics available (Eurostat, 2010).

Gaelscoileanna are a relatively recent development, started only late in the 20th century. Nearly all instruction is through the Irish language, though they differ from Gaeltacht National Schools in that most are under the patronage of a voluntary organisation, Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge, rather than a diocesan patronage. There are 368 Gaelscoils across the country and, with nearly 10% of all school children attend, it is the fastest growing education sector. Surprisingly, the Irish language fluency requirement is the same for teachers wishing to work in these schools as for those wishing to teach in any other national school. All primary school teachers must satisfy

the Department of Education and Skills that they can not only teach the Irish language but also teach the range of primary school subjects through Irish. In order to gain full recognition as a primary school teacher, applicants must pass the written, aural and oral parts of the Scrúdú Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge and provide certification that they have completed an approved three-week course in the Gaeltacht.

According to the Twenty Year Irish Language Strategy, published in November 2009,

the objective of Government policy in relation to Irish is to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language. Specifically, the Government aim is to ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English (Gov. of Ireland, 2009).

Rudolf Steiner argued that the reason the worlds peoples have different languages is not an accident of circumstance, but rather that the words in different languages for similar concepts are unique because the concepts themselves are subtly divergent. He considered important the teaching of a language that developed in a particular region as a way to get to know the development of human culture in that region. In lectures to Waldorf teachers in Holland, he said that they need to gain an inner feeling of language. Though modern languages have for the most part become abstracted from the feelings, or “folk soul” of the people who speak it, it is possible and necessary to experience a living and real connection to this aspect of it (Steiner, 1924b). In the lectures he gave to teachers shortly before the opening of the original Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Steiner called for a new philology, a “study of the origin of words” as the means by which man both reveals and forms his relationship to the cosmos (as referenced in Stockmeyer, 1969).

### 2.2.2.2 Structure of Primary Schools

Under Article 42.4 of our Constitution the Government is obliged to "provide for" education. That the Government “provides for” rather than “provides” education, may

be a quite enlightened position to take, if used to allow freedom in individual schools and classrooms to determine pedagogy. If, on the other hand, the government's motivation is to absolve itself of responsibility for education. this cannot be healthy. Minister for Education Mary Hanafin declared that the Government has no legal responsibility for what happens in our schools. Colm O’Gorman, Executive Director of Amnesty International Ireland, made the following comment in relation to this situation:

Instead of a properly funded state run education system we have an under funded network of private institutions. How can there be a meaningful right to education if the State washes its hands of our primary education system and no one can be held accountable? (Amnesty International Ireland, 2009).

Coolahan (1981) describes the dominant structure of primary schools in Ireland as having the following characteristics: owned and managed by churches, bulk of capital and current costs provided by the state, and state control of curriculum and assessment. He cites historical reasons, some of which I have alluded to above, for this apparently contradictory pattern of school ownership and management.

### 2.2.2.3 Religion

For modern people, religious faith is a powerful identity signifier, and, consequently, one of the most strongly held and contentious issues in modern society. As a country finding a mature identity, this is one of Ireland's greatest struggles.

We have seen a sea change in our relationship to the Catholic Church, who has weathered scandals in the last decades that have called into question its very foundational integrity. While, across the border, it may prove that a lasting peace has been won in the North between sectarian groups, as a violent, fractious time seems to have now passed. Immigration has resulted in a diversity of faith communities that represents, on a small scale, virtually the entire variety of the world's populace. Non-theistic positions are now far more common than ever previously. The range of belief systems from secular humanism to atheism is quite in vogue, though the largest group

in this category would probably be those who are agnostic and ambivalent. On the other hand, a significant number of people identify themselves as interested in spirituality, while at the same time eschewing organised religion of any denomination.

Unsurprisingly, one of the areas in which this battle is playing out most vociferously is education. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has told Ireland to increase its efforts to ensure that non-denominational primary education is widely available, saying it is in breach of law by denying the choice of secular education.

Some have questioned whether offering religion in public education is a violation of the child's rights. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that children should be taught about religious culture and ethics in an objective, critical and pluralist manner. In 2009 this court ruled against a 1920's Italian law requiring that crucifixes be displayed in classrooms, saying the practice both violated the right of parents to educate their children as they saw fit and ran counter to the child's right to freedom of religion (BBC News, 2009). Sixteen months later, the same court overturned its previous ruling, finding no evidence that the display of such a symbol on classroom walls might have an influence on pupils (BBC News, 2011). Although the Vatican might have argued against the reasoning, it was happy for the reversal. Citizens in Ireland, or any other of the forty-six Council of Europe member states, could use the ruling as a legal argument in national courts at least to keep religious symbols in classrooms.

Religion is one of the defined subjects of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum and, as such, is required to be taught to all children at all levels, throughout the primary school years. Since 1971, schools are required to ensure that the religious 'ethos' (more recently defined as 'characteristic spirit') of the school patron permeates the whole school programme. Until Educate Together Schools were established, that meant teaching one specific faith in each school and, with only very few exceptions, that faith was Catholicism. The State only funds the education of teachers for the religious programmes of the Catholic and Protestant churches.

Schools have been legislatively granted the right to prefer applicants from their own

religious communities. In other words, the patrons are given a right to choose which children they will and will not educate.

Theoretically parents are granted a similar right to choose. Both the Constitution and the Education Act allow parents to “absent” their children from religious content in schools. In practical terms this isn't an option, as no realistic provision for such absenting is provided.

The new pilot V.E.C. primary schools, known as Community National Schools (C.N.S.) segregate children according to their families' religions, and offers faith formation within school hours when there is a viable sized group (currently considered to be seven pupils or more).

Many argue that state funded education should be secular, though Educate Together refers to itself as multi-denominational (and includes in the definition the children of those who ascribe to no religious belief system). As such, it seeks to objectively teach diversity of religious and to make clear a distinction between faith and reason as a guide to knowledge.

Although the Educate Together schools initially offered multiple faith formation curricula in an attempt to cater to the multiple needs of their communities, they now predominantly offer this outside the regular school day, making the school building available for after-school religious programmes organised by parents. These schools are 'founded by parents' and 'driven by parents' (Rowe, 2010) . The majority are under the patronage of an umbrella organisation, Educate Together, though 14 out of 58 in the Educate Together network have their own patron body (Murray, 2011), some of which do, in fact, offer faith formation as part of the school time curriculum (Lewis, 2010).

Waldorf schools are much more aligned with the Educate Together approach than any of the other, sectarian, systems employed in the State, in that faith formation education is not a goal of the curriculum. The point could validly be made that Anthroposophy should also be considered a faith, in that the epistemological approach is based on a certain understanding of reality, aspects of which are outside the dominant paradigm.

However, the schools do not indoctrinate children into anthroposophy, no more than the educational theories of Dewey or Vygotsky are taught to children in other national schools. In fact, Rudolf Steiner once presented the following as central tenets of his educational approach:

The golden rules which must be embraced by the teacher's whole being, not held as theory, are: Reverent gratitude to the world in the person of the child which we contemplate every day, for the child presents a problem set us by divine worlds: Thankfulness to the universe. Love for what we have to do with the child. Respect for the freedom of the child — a freedom we must not endanger; for it is to this freedom we educate the child, that he may stand in freedom in the world at our side (Steiner, 1922).

The only curricular element that I could find in traditional Waldorf education that can clearly be considered a type of faith formation content is the Morning Verse. The following two verses are recited every school day, from class one through eight.



To be said with classes one through four

The sun with loving light  
Makes bright for me each day.  
The soul with spirit power  
Gives strength into my limbs.  
In sunlight shining clear  
I reverence, O God,  
The strength of humankind  
Which thou, so graciously,  
Hast planted in my soul  
That I, with all my might,  
May love to work and learn  
From thee comes light and strength  
To thee, rise love and thanks.

To be said with classes 5 and 6 (or through 8)

I do behold the world  
Wherein there shines the sun  
Wherein there gleam the stars  
Wherein there lie the stones  
The plants they live and grow  
The beasts they feel and live  
And we to spirit give  
A dwelling in our souls

I do behold the soul  
That living dwells in me  
God's spirit lives and grows  
In light of sun and soul  
In heights of worlds without  
In depths of soul within

To thee, O spirit of God  
I, seeking, turn myself  
That strength and grace and skill  
For learning and for work  
In me may live and grow.

# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction & Research Objectives

Fundamentally, I have undertaken this project in the hope of addressing the questions of usefulness and appropriateness of the Waldorf educational approach as applied within state funded primary schools in Ireland today.

I have questioned the applicability of Waldorf education: as practised in the two provisionally recognised Steiner national schools, Raheen Wood and Mol an Óige; to future Steiner or Waldorf national schools; and the adoption of Waldorf methods in national schools in general.

## 3.2 Key Issues in this Research

The objectives for this project are to develop a complete and contextualized picture of the educational philosophy that stands behind Waldorf education; to identify best practices and adaptations used in Waldorf primary schools; and to fully consider the benefits and compromises in Government association.

The research questions I have explored are covering relatively new and uncharted ground. For this reason, a combination of methods serve to craft a more useful map. The action research is balanced with historical reading. The scope of my research has the breadth, depth and longitudinal reach to derive conclusions with validity and reliability.

The methods I will employ to answer my research questions are a thorough review of available literature, queries of primary teachers through interviews, and statistical analysis.

The research for my dissertation focuses on Waldorf Education as a set of principles, and how it can be applied to primary education in Ireland. I have formulated this as three primary questions, with a number of secondary questions falling out from those.

***Research Question 1: How can Rudolf Steiner's approach to education enliven teaching?***

Waldorf is a unique and vibrant approach to education. Beyond a thorough view of human development that addresses what to teach when, the approach calls for a fundamentally different relationship of the teacher to both the work of teaching and to the children in his/her charge. I believe that exploring the above question helps contextualise this approach within the modern Irish primary school landscape, something that has not yet been attempted.

Of particular interest to me are:

- synchronising curricular themes with child development
- teacher as author of classroom content
- meditation and self reflection as a research tool for teachers
- the practice of looping (teacher spends multiple years with one group of children)

The ways in which I have considered this first question are through reviewing the body of literature that describes and evaluates the Waldorf approach, and through interviews with the teachers who are employed in the new Steiner national schools.

***Research Question 2: Is it possible to adopt the Waldorf methodology as a means to implement the Irish Primary Curriculum?***

This second question is both unique and practical; hence its centrality to the project. One of the greatest strengths of Waldorf schools is their adaptability, both to reflect the cultural values of the peoples in each region of the world and to meet the changing climate of educational needs.

I will have searched for three varieties of outcomes when comparing the Irish Primary Curriculum with the literature on Steiner Waldorf methods:

Areas in which the strands of the various Primary Curriculum areas fit quite harmoniously with the Steiner Waldorf approach to these subjects

Areas where the Primary Curriculum and the traditional Steiner Waldorf pedagogy are similar enough that small modifications to one or both, 'bending' the rules, can allow unhindered continuance

Areas where forthright comparison shows fundamentally contrasting points of view, where only 'breaking' DES rules, or receiving exemptions from those rules, would allow Steiner Waldorf pedagogy to be practised without structurally-weakening compromise.

If the State is financially supporting and validating the schools, it is reasonable for it to expect Waldorf schools to adapt. Some of the changes required could prove to be beneficial in making the Waldorf schools more effective. However, if difference of ethos is not respected and understood, the requirements of the State might compromise the integrity of the Waldorf schools.

During the period from 1926 until 1988, the English educational system provided a great deal of curricular autonomy to elementary teachers there, in exchange for licensed professionalism, with the Board of Education changing the basis of curriculum control from 'prescription to suggestion' (Ozga, 2000). The degree to which such curricular autonomy exists in Ireland today is relevant to the validity of the process of re-envisioning the curriculum in a Steinerian context.

I have searched for documentary evidence of the experience that schools and individual teachers have had in adapting the Waldorf approach to the Irish primary educational context. As expected, I found less than enough published material to build a solid picture, so that I then relied more strongly on oral history, collected during my action research phase, through teacher interviews.

***Research Question 3: In reconciling the Waldorf approach with the Irish national curriculum and the established methods and procedures of Irish national schools,***

*what areas of conflict are perceived, and what adaptations or compromises could be made?*

Another unique strength of the Waldorf approach is its reliance on the individual class teacher to design a unique curriculum for his/her class. As a consequence, much of the literature from the international Waldorf movement detailing the teacher-as-curriculum-creator approach describes unique circumstances. I am interested in how this research can be best utilized in new contexts, while honouring its distinctive regional relevance.

Just as with my second research question, I have found a dearth of published material directly exploring this area of enquiry. Interviews with teachers is an obvious research tool, as this provides a window into experiences of those on the 'front line'.

One facet of this question that has proved of central importance relates to the training and experience in Waldorf methods of those teachers employed to teach in Steiner national schools. The patron body of the two new schools has agreed with the Department of Education and Skills that, in accord with its rule for all national schools, only candidates with recognised teacher qualifications will be employed. As the D.E.S. currently recognises no Waldorf style teacher training as valid, the schools will need to employ mainstream educated teachers who either have additional Waldorf training or do not. Here it has been useful to consider empirical data relating to employment figures for the two schools.

### 3.3 A Unique Paradigm for Enquiry

My methodologies are mixed, both qualitative and quantitative. In this work I gain inspiration from the philosophies of ethnography and interpretivism, and from anthroposophy.

The critical ethnographic method is, according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), qualitative, anthropological, participant/observer based and forged from critical theory. It is concerned with exposing oppression and inequality, and bringing empowerment. Hence, it is inherently political. Clough and Nutbrown (2002) assert,

an ethnographic study may tell you a great deal about the culture of any given situation and the people involved in it, but you would not easily be able to infer generalities about other situations from this sort of data.

As my questions concern not only the current application of Waldorf methods in the primary system, but also the future adoption of Waldorf methods, and, potentially, curricular elements, in other Irish national schools, I have sought to infer just such generalities. Consequently, I did not rely exclusively on ethnographic methods.

Bloor and Wood (2006) make it clear that ethnography, as a methodology, is primarily fieldwork within a given culture. The main thrust of my research was into the literature of Waldorf education and the Irish Primary Curriculum. But even this aspect of my research can be seen as ethnographic, if ethnography, rather than a prescriptive methodology, is considered a philosophical underpinning to my efforts. If the core definition of ethnography is, as O'Leary (2007) states,

exploring a cultural group in order to understand, discover, describe, and interpret a way of life from the point of view of its participants

then this is a reasonable choice for this work. The 'unstructured' conversational collection of data (Hammersly, 1999) may describe my approach to interviews, but the other methods I use would fit into a more structured, albeit still qualitative, methodological framework.

Whether a researcher should best be part of a culture or removed from it is often debated within the field of ethnographic enquiry. The concern over subjectivity of the researcher, leading to self deceit and bias, is valid, and met in the case of this project by the application of mixed methodologies (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). On the other hand, positionality – to have a clear and unique perspective on the issues explored - legitimates the research.

Interpretivist methodology assumes that social interaction is based around the principles of consciousness of ourselves and our relationship to others, choices of action (behaviour), and the unpredictable nature of those actions. For Interpretivists, though

facts about behaviour can be established, they are always context-bound, and not transferable to other people, times, or situations. In fact, they may not even apply to different people in the same situation (Schutt, 2006).

Admittedly, qualitative methodologies are both subjective and political. But the belief that reality is socially constructed seems the purest way to explore the questions I have set myself, so as to focus attention on learning the meanings people give to that reality. The two main criticisms of qualitative methodologies are reliability and validity. If one agrees with the following (and I mostly do), these issues are to a great degree resolved:

Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time (Schwandt, 1994).

Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf pedagogical approach, founded a spiritual philosophy which he named 'Anthroposophy,' or, alternately, 'Spiritual Science'. He defined this methodology as a path of self development, and claimed that it would have practical applications in many area of human activity, including education (Clouder, 2003). Anthroposophy is the application of the rigorous logical tools of the traditional scientific method to subjective, 'inner' experiences. Through this approach, he claimed to find evidence for the existence of spirit, reincarnation, and karma. His writings lay out arguments that human beings have the potential for free will, and that human consciousness evolves from generation to generation.

The dominant scientific paradigm expressly rejects such metaphysics, and it would require a large body of contrary evidence to challenge the basic assumptions of the prevailing perspective enough to shift this scientific paradigm (Schutt, 2006). It could be reasonably argued, though, that Anthroposophy itself is a research methodology, and perhaps the ideal one through which to gain understanding about Waldorf Education, as an educational impulse that arises from the same source.

Though I have not, in this project, presented the fruits of my own efforts in an anthroposophically based quest for knowledge, it would be fair to say that the very fact that I do not reject the validity of such an approach to research can lead to the conclusion that the paradigm from which I carry out this research, as well as being

influenced by philosophies of ethnography and interpretivism, is impressed by anthroposophy.

### 3.4 Study of Research Perspectives and Methods

In this section I hope to explore the philosophical perspectives underlying various methodologies and to identify the most appropriate to employ in this dissertation. As I am interested in showing the integrity of an educational philosophy, as well as its usefulness in the modern Irish context, it is important that I first identify my position on the epistemological question of how knowledge is derived.

#### 3.4.1 Quantitative Research

The philosophy of Positivism, a "recurrent theme in the history of western thought from the Ancient Greeks to the present day" (Cohen, 2007), holds that the essence of the world exists outside of ourselves, and that we can find answers to all questions through quantitative research (Schutt, 2006). Within this paradigm, confining one's research to the three goals of Positivism - *description, control, and prediction* - leads to a complete picture of the subject.

Quantitative research is an excellent way to create a consensus of opinion on the ways and laws of the physical world. Those who adopt positivist methodologies to study social behaviour go further, claiming for positivism a usefulness and desirability in this context the same as these methods are to natural scientists studying behaviour in the natural world (Schutt, 2006). Quantitative methodology expects to find objectively knowable reality. But to structure and draw conclusions from data it must make assumptions to form a theoretical basis on which such conclusions have meaning (Silverman, 2000).

#### 3.4.2 Qualitative Research

The Anti positivist stance argues that the human being is an integral part in the activity of knowing, and the range of research methodologies that arise from this philosophical



position are known as Qualitative. Qualitative research attempts to understand human behaviour and the motives that govern such behaviour, and 'to document the world from the point of view of the people studied' (Hammersly, 1992) and shows a preference for inductive, hypothesis generating research, rather than hypothesis testing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The qualitative approach investigates the why and how of decision making, not just what, where, when. The goal of qualitative research is to discover patterns which emerge after close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the research topic (Creswell, 1994).

### 3.4.3 Qualitative verses Quantitative

Positivism postulates that all knowledge can be achieved through rigorous empirical, scientific enquiry. The objective weighing and measuring of the world and of human phenomena is derived through the employ of quantitative research methods. Anti-positivism holds that, without the goal of *understanding*, the scientific methodology lacks unity. Only through qualitative research can one glimpse the essence of social functioning.

This latter view, sometimes referred to as 'naturalism' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) is the one that has the greatest usefulness for this type of project. However, I don't discount the power that the tools of positivism have to confirm validity. Nor do I concur with the Anti-positivist view that academics must necessarily reject empiricism and the scientific method in the conduct of sociological research. I have therefore made some limited use of quantitative research to produce data of some workable value, where most appropriate.

It is not possible, at least in social sciences, to divorce our own selves from the equation. Some might argue that quantitative, 'value free' research is, even in the realm of observations of the physical world, an impossibility: human enquiry, minus the human. Certainly, many social scientists believe that such an approach is undesirable when exploring social structures. Insisting that research follow purely quantitative logic would rule out the study of much of what I have explored such as human emotional states and the source of motive, as it can conceal as well as reveal basic social processes

(Silverman, 2000).

I do not think the true answer to the question of how we gain knowledge is found at either extreme, as laid out above, however. Rather, it is at the juncture of external experience and the inner consciousness of the observer that knowledge resides. The fact that simple quantitative measures are a feature of some good qualitative research shows that the whole 'qualitative/quantitative' dichotomy is open to question, even highly dangerous (Silverman, 2000). As Hammersly (1992) notes, 'The process of inquiry in science is the same whatever method is used, and the retreat into paradigms effectively stultifies debate and hampers progress.'

Qualitative research methods are not better than quantitative. It all comes down to what information is being sought. A mixed method approach should show more than any single method would do on its own. My choice not to use other quantitative methodologies is based on my belief that they would not serve the purpose of answering these research questions more effectively than the qualitative methods I have identified.

## 3.5 Research Construction and Design

### 3.5.1 Documentary Research

The way in which I have approached the literature search is as follows. First, Rudolf Steiner's epistemology was explored through an examination of his own methodology, which he called Anthroposophy (McDermott, 1984), and placed in the context of his biography. I used the biographical method, a special version of documentary method (Sarantakos, 2004), when researching the life of Rudolf Steiner. The primary source was Steiner's own autobiography, though I surveyed the range of published biographical material, both first hand accounts and secondary sources. To develop an overview of his epistemology, I critically read what he referred to as the four foundational books of his written works: *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*, *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Spiritual Processes in Human Life and in the Cosmos*, *Christianity as Mystical Fact and the Mysteries of Antiquity*, and *An Outline of Esoteric Science* (McDermott, 1984).

After exploring the philosophical underpinnings, then I reviewed the main body of works on Waldorf school pedagogy and curriculum, historically and presently, showing how both discrete themes that are explored for a period of days or weeks and threads that continue throughout the primary years have unique relevance to supporting the growth of a knowledgeable, motivated and compassionate populace in twenty-first century Ireland. This set of principles are found primarily in books and lectures from Rudolf Steiner, and by those who have followed him. Though Best (1970) points out that secondary sources are often of limited use, because of errors that result when information is passed on from one person to another, it is generally recognised that secondary sources can put one's research into context and allow learning from earlier endeavours (Travers, 1969).

The third aspect of my documentary research was the Irish Primary Curriculum itself, to put Waldorf into perspective. Through the most recent version of the complete revised curriculum (DES, 1999) plus the body of circulars that augment it, I searched for beneficial ways the Waldorf stream can flow into the mainstream, and ways Waldorf can be improved as a result. As many of the themes I explore are quite topical, newspaper articles, web pages, Department of Education and Skills memos and Steiner National School documents need to be included in the scope of my research.

Historical research, involving the identification and limitation of an area of study, and sometimes the formulation of a hypothesis, qualifies as scientific endeavour, though it is neither repeatable nor directly observable (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). As this type of research can show how and why educational theories and practices develop, I certainly used this approach to explain Waldorf pedagogy. As I review the published work of experts about their area of expertise, subtext is not of paramount importance, obviating the need for textual analysis (Fairclough, 2003) when carrying out my Literature Review.

### 3.5.2 Primary Research

The five main quantitative methods traditionally used in social science research are: social survey, experiment, official statistics, structured observation, and content analysis

(Bryman, 1988). For this project, I have made use of official statistics. The advantage of this method is that it is objectively verifiable.

To explore the unfolding effects of state recognition on the two pilot Waldorf communities, I compiled and evaluated statistics on level and type of teacher training (both as defined in the mainstream, and in the international Waldorf community), and amount of experience teaching in a 'traditional' Waldorf school, and how this changes over time.

### 3.5.3 Design of Interviews

To determine from the teachers' perspective whether and in what ways the Waldorf approach to education leads to more effective teaching, as well as determining actual changes in the classroom as a result of state recognition, I conducted interviews of full time teachers currently working in the Raheen Wood and Mol an Óige Steiner National Schools. These were carried out during the first term of the third year of provisional recognition. Because my questions concern delivery of the Primary Curriculum, Learning Support teachers were excluded from the interviews, as they do not carry that responsibility. As the size of the population is quite small, I interviewed the whole population to achieve the highest level of reliability possible (Robson, 1998). The research goals I had for these was to collate best practices and to shed light on the process involved in carrying out Steiner's pedagogical indications.

Concerning the amount of structure in the process of doing interviews, it is clear that the less form given to the interview, the extreme of which has been called 'conversation with a purpose', the greater the validity and the more that is found out, at the expense of reliability. Conversely, the more formed and 'theory driven', the more opportunity for quantification; hence, the greater reliability as quantifiable information (MacNaughton, Rolf, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Ethnography tends toward the least formed end of the spectrum, rating scales would be the most formed.

The interview method I employed was semi-structured. All interviewees were asked the same questions (see appendix). Rather than follow a rigid script, I allowed a

conversational flow, determining the direction the interview takes based on the initial answers, following up interesting ideas. The order of the questions varied from one interviewee to another, and the respondents were informed in advance that they could speak about any other matters that they think would be useful to the research. This 'incomplete' approach allowed me to both probe and prompt (Robson, 1998).

Were I to rely solely on the resultant information to address my research questions, this approach could be faulted as one-sided and unreliable. As the evidence from these interviews is balanced with documentary research as well as quantitative evidence, however, the resulting triangulation proves the veracity of the information collected.

This approach disallowed the possibility of supplying the interviewees with written questions ahead of time. However, as research has shown that participants on such studies are “unlikely to properly read information (e.g. information sheets, letters, scripts)” and that it is more effective to explain a project verbally (Armstrong, Barnett, Cooper, Monkman, Moran-Ellis, & Shepherd, 2008), this did not detrimentally effect the exercise.

The techniques of Conversational Analysis were of some use to me in my research. The interpretation of language is crucial when the speaker is relatively unconscious in their speaking, and hides meaning between the words, or in what isn't said (ten Have, 2007). As I was in discussion with experts about their area of expertise, subtext was not of paramount importance. Clough and Nutbrown (2002) point to the usefulness of 'radical' reading for situational analysis, as well as textural analysis, a perspective that did inform my research when doing interviews.

### 3.6 Ethical Issues

A primary ethical concern is Informed Consent of interviewees and sensitivity toward the researcher and vice versa: Most of the informants are known to the researcher. Being aware of the types of bias that can arise from interviews: from the interviewee, from the interviewer, or from the interaction between both (Travers, 1969), so as to

reflect the informant's 'true' voice, I edited and presented the information appropriately and with sensitivity.

I informed potential participants in advance of any features of the research that might reasonably be expected to influence their willingness to take part in the study. So far as possible, I was honest and open about the research, providing an account of the purpose of the study as well as its procedures and application.

### 3.7 Limitations & Variables

My own desire for carrying out this research arises from nearly twenty years' exposure to Waldorf education in the U.S. and Ireland. My interest is professional, as a teacher trained in and experienced adopting and adapting Waldorf methods, as well as a mentor and trainer of new teachers. But my enthusiasm also arises from personal circumstances, as my own son has experienced twelve years of Waldorf education.

My unique perspective builds in me a conviction that Waldorf methods should be available to all, not just to those who have the ability and make the economic and geographic choice to send their children to parent-funded Waldorf schools.

Due to my background and experience in Waldorf, I acknowledge subjectivity in approaching this project. I have considered two educational systems. While I was at the outset quite familiar with and convinced of one, I was relatively uninformed about the other. This surely influence my perspective.

So that my appreciation of my subject does not create bias in the research results, it was necessary for me to exercise a significant degree of self awareness, assuring balance and an appropriate level of criticality. On the other hand, as it was my intention to use documentary evidence to convince the reader of the usefulness of the Waldorf educational approach, the fact of my clear positionality should have enhanced, rather than invalidated, the project.

The extraordinary variety and scale of Rudolf Steiner's literary and rhetorical output provides both huge possibility for academic exploration and something of a hindrance

when attempting an overview (Ullrich, 1994). Rudolf Steiner gave over 6,000 lectures and authored more than 30 books on broad themes of human and cosmic spiritual evolution. Publication of the complete edition of his writings and lectures began at the Rudolf Steiner Verlag in Dornach, Switzerland in 1955. At present, 350 volumes are available (Clouder, 2003). More than 25,000 pages of his writings have been translated to English (McDermott, 1984).

In fact, his research and reforming ideas in the areas of Philosophy, Economics, Agriculture and the Arts have been afforded little regard in academia (McDermott, 1984. Goral, 2009). This can even be said, if to a lesser degree, of his educational theories, despite the large and growing popularity of their application. Though this may have more to do with his 'strange and esoteric diction, which hinders scientific and philosophical analysis' (Ullrich, 1994), than the quantity of ideas themselves. There are, for instance, few critical Steiner biographies.

One main source of documentary evidence was transcripts of lectures by Rudolf Steiner, and this raises an issue of veracity. On the one hand, these are first person sources of information, giving credence to their authenticity. But they purport to be an accurate record of the very words spoken aloud, in the days before electronic recording of sound was readily available. Consequently, some of these lectures were stenographically recorded; others were compiled from notes of attendees (von Pokrzywnicki, 2009).

Although a number of these written accounts were proofed by their author before being published, many were not. In every case, they have been translated from the language in which they were originally delivered, German, into the one in which I am fluent, English. It is something of an understatement, then, to say that their veracity is questionable. It was necessary for me to reflect the confidence level appropriately, and wherever possible to rely most heavily on those sources that were confirmed by their author before publication.

To assure criticality in reading of historical data, I was cognisant of the need to evaluate for authenticity of the source, as well as the numerous issues in evaluating for accuracy and worth of the data, including the author's competence, motivation, and purpose

(Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, Clough & Nutbrown, 2002). I have focused on timeliness and relevance as relates to Irish educational practice, accuracy and context, as well as looking for flaws in the reasoning and research design.

And, more centrally, I attempted to be self-reflective when reading, so as to learn more about my own evolving perspective on the issues. Because I was not myself educated in a Waldorf school, I come to it from an outsider's perspective. Nonetheless, because I have, to a great degree, adopted this approach over my years as a primary teacher, I am aware of the danger of reading less critically material within this tradition compared to the reading of material from other traditions.

Though a number of concerns have been raised, I have addressed all to a reasonable degree. My twenty years of experience with Waldorf education and the other theories of Rudolf Steiner, as well as my first-hand experience teaching at primary level in Ireland, gave me a unique perspective from which to enter into this work. My awareness of the pitfalls that await the naive researcher have assured my avoidance of them.

### 3.8 Summary

By means of a thorough review of available literature, I have developed a complete picture of the philosophy and practice of Waldorf primary education, focused on a modern Irish context. This allows me to identify best practices and adaptations used in Waldorf primary schools; and to fully consider the benefits and compromises in Government association.

I then analysed the application of this pedagogical approach to the culture of Irish national schools. For this, I considered the Department of Education and Science's own literature on the curriculum and the record of its dealings with non standard educational approaches historically. Interviews with teachers gave first hand accounts to round out the picture. One area of particular concern is the divergent expectations of the background training requirements for primary teachers in Steiner National Schools between those held by the Department, and those engaged in (traditionally independent)



Waldorf education. To objectively explore this divergence, I have utilised quantitative research method of statistical analysis.

Once having identified any areas where a full and unrestricted adoption of the core principles of Waldorf pedagogy cannot directly be implemented at present in national schools, I considered possible solutions that could be derived through adaptations or compromises, either on the side of the Waldorf movement, the Government, or both.

Having here first explored the ethical issues that might arise in attempting this research, then identifying the possible variables that may have impacted on the outcome, and demonstrating that these issues and variables are taken into account, I have thereby shown that accuracy of the results is reasonably assured.

# 4 Findings

## 4.1 Waldorf National School Class Teacher Interviews

In summarising the interviews I undertook for this project, it should be noted at the outset that a significant number of full time teachers at the Steiner national schools have little or no specific training in Waldorf theory and methodology. Through self directed research, mentoring, and simply working in an environment with a Waldorf ethos, it can be assumed that those individuals who did not have the luxury of a full and complete preparatory training know a good deal more than a typical national school teacher on the unique pedagogy to Waldorf schools, but should be considered less than 'experts' on the finer points (more is said about this in 4.2). On the other hand, nearly all of them have experience teaching in traditional national school settings.

### **Effective distinctions in educational approach**

Unsurprisingly, all respondents were able to give numerous examples of what they consider to be effective aspects to Waldorf education that are distinct from the pedagogy employed in traditional national schools throughout Ireland. Many of these were identified in my review of the literature on the Waldorf movement internationally, although some had not been previously identified. To give structure to the responses, I have grouped them into themes highlighting the relationships between teachers, children, and the curriculum.

Practically speaking, the clearest distinction observable by Steiner national teachers is the relationship to the curriculum, experienced both from the perspective of the teacher and from that of the child. The centrality of not only the teaching of the Arts themselves, such as drawing, painting, music and literary composition, but also the lively and creative artistic approach to all subjects was often commented upon. One teacher spoke of the artistic way to bring academics that nourishes imagination, while another addressed the balancing of 'grounded, earth subjects' with Arts. An aesthetic sensibility was also noted in the preferential use of natural objects as teaching materials, as well as the frequent exploration of and engagement with the natural environment.

Another area referred to by multiple teachers is the three day story cycle of the main lesson, (described in section 2.1.4). The effective use of repetition of content, utilising the element of time and rest to 'cure' the learning process, was seen to be an essential tool to effective teaching, as it allows complete absorption by the pupils. Also, the children's creative, dramatic retelling of pedagogical stories develops the ability to encapsulate the essentials.

Considered from the perspective of the child, the relationship to the curriculum is uniquely beneficial, even salutogenetic (health bringing). Main lesson blocks, giving students time to work intensively with a particular subject for a period of three or four weeks, are seen to utilise children's enthusiasm and creative expression, building an organic relationship of the child to his own learning. This is seen as a 'depth rather than breadth' approach, emphasising the child and his relationship with, rather than a body of knowledge about, each subject. This helps instil a sense of reverence for the world. One teacher likened the respect for storytelling that develops in the pupils of her school to that of the people of Ireland long ago, when orality was the primary method of instruction.

At the same time, Waldorf is also experienced as a method of integrated curricular delivery. The active and multi-sensory approach employed engages the child's whole physical body and meets all learning styles. Starting the school day with physical exercises is particularly effective in meeting the liveliness in many boys. Working with the 'breathing rhythm' of the day, week, month, and year is a natural approach, contrary to the assumption that children are able to strive and learn at a constant rate. Lastly, engaging the children's feelings in what they hear, see, and create, particularly evident when aiming toward beautiful presentation in the 'textbooks' they make for each subject, is recognised by the teachers as instilling care and pride in work that will serve them for all future endeavours.

This has an effect as well on the children's relationships with one another, a concern that some of the interviewees focused on. Recognising the class as a social group going through life together, rather than one of administrative convenience, is seen as a strength of this pedagogy, one that helps cultivate healthy relationships between the

children. This, it is believed, would not be possible without the commitment by the school and the teacher to keep one individual shepherding the class through their primary years.

The most frequently brought up relationship distinction is between the teacher and child. Growing an anthroposophical understanding of child development, while honing one's observational abilities applied to specific children, is seen to lead to age-suitable teaching, enabling a relationship of trust between child and teacher. This translates into adaptability and flexibility in teaching approach: taking cues from the children and from the moment. Taking on the role of an adult authority and guide, who knows and even loves the children, helps the teacher to establish and maintain unconditional positive regard toward each pupil in her care. This both results from and leads further toward understanding the long term effect of one's teaching.

Another significant area of school life that benefits from looping is that of the relationships formed between the teacher and the parents of the children in the class, where it is often possible to forge close and trusting partnerships centred on meeting the needs of the children.

An oft cited Waldorf attribute is the evolving relationship the educator must develop with her own self by engaging in this profession, and the teachers in the Irish Steiner national schools expressed awareness of this. The self education of the teacher, through objective reflection, was recognised as an important characteristic, albeit a challenging one. To become aware of one's own personal quirks and predilections, and to an extent overcome them, is a difficult but rewarding journey. Additionally, commitment to bringing a six year curriculum to life, without ever teaching the same thing twice, allows for fresh engagement, while requiring a lot of research, study, and additional effort. At the same time, the simplicity inherent in taking one theme and extending it over a period of time, was appreciated as a means of centring one's thoughts on the essentials.

The teachers spoke as well of their relationships with each other, and the ways in which they feel these are uniquely influenced by the Waldorf ethos. Some felt supported by a shared underlying philosophical and spiritual understanding. One mentioned the

advantage of borrowing from colleagues' creativity in order to create her lessons. Collegial support is felt also in relating to the children. In these schools, an understanding is held that every teacher takes some measure of responsibility for each child, even those she does not have lessons with, and to help build a shared picture of the needs and gifts of each one.

An area I had not considered before the interviews is the way in which adopting Waldorf methodologies can help in the school/state relationship, in that the 1999 Curriculum is aspirational rather than descriptive, and, in the words of one teacher, Waldorf offers an approach to implementing the new national curriculum in the spirit that it's meant to be taught.

### **Adaptations in teaching approach**

Nearly all interviewees identified what they perceived as both positive and negative aspects to the changes they underwent in their approach when implementing a Steiner national school educational context. Positive aspects that were identified include more rigorous planing and documentation, resulting in clear content guidelines and greater awareness of learning outcomes. The melding of the two is said to be 'very stimulating,' leading to more Irish language teaching as well as more effective use of support teachers. The breadth of skills and knowledge in Maths curriculum is embraced, as is more encouraging of scientific investigation in children. Researching mainstream curricular sources has resulted in novel approaches to History and Geography in younger classes. Interestingly, one teacher stated that it brought her a deeper understanding of the aims of Waldorf education, as if seeing it through new eyes.

The teachers identified a number of detrimental effects on their teaching as well. On a pragmatic level, complaints were heard about the increases in teacher contact hours, allowing less time in the school day for reflection, administration and preparatory work, and the onerous level of record keeping now expected of them. In terms of actual curriculum, there is a feeling of too much content to cover, resulting in a sacrifice of depth for breadth, but also wholism for a compartmentalisation, or even atomisation, of subject matter. An opinion that too much weight is placed on academic elements of education and on assessment was voiced. Another teacher argued that the emphasis on

intellectual (talking and questioning) schooling rather than sensory experiences in lower school creates an educational environment in which the integration of an artistic, aesthetic element is very difficult. One statement is echoed many times: that trailblazing a Steiner/National hybrid project, building it all 'from scratch' and 'on the job'. creates a monumental challenge. One teacher reports that this results in her primary focus moving away from the children, and onto curriculum documentation.

### **Expert-produced versus home-made lessons**

The literature on Waldorf education suggests that there is an expectation that teachers will, to a significant degree, research and design their own lessons on each subject in the curriculum. In practical terms this means a reduced usage of published teaching aids, such as Mathematics or English workbooks, which have a curricular range and sequence built into their structure. Similarly, textbooks that provide a well-marked pathway for teachers through a particular subject area at a particular level would often be rejected, or used sparingly. In this regard, Waldorf pedagogy attempts to 'take out the middleman' of lesson creation, so that the one responsible for delivery, with direct experience of the unique needs of her class, becomes the author of the content she delivers.

Many of the interviewees shared positive experiences working in this way. The benefits they see for the children include the possibility to individuate to the developmental profile of the class, creating a much more vibrant and meaningful experience. One can be more responsive to and give greater latitude for pupils teaching each other. These facts allow the curriculum to come through relationships with each other and the teacher, rather than through books. It was recognised that this approach requires confidence and trust in the children's innate intelligence and ability. The freedom to work at the pace of and with the enthusiasm of the children provides scenarios where they become co-creators of the curriculum. Another advantage pointed out is the fluidity with which subjects can be integrated, in an organic and creative manner. Consequently, every activity can be meaningfully and intentionally connected, and in such a way as to relate back to previous group experiences with which the children can readily identify, rather than abstract concepts that are so often the main thrust of

textbooks. Such an environment facilitates self-directed, self-initiated learning, so that both slower and more advanced children experience success, working to their own capacity at their own pace.

Also reported by the participants were benefits to themselves. Effectively, these teachers are forming their own textbooks on each subject, based on curricular investigation and child study. A number of participants described this as involving personal growth, and providing satisfaction and nourishment for their teaching. One spoke of the 'excitement of the new', the 'risk element' in presenting her own material. Another commented on the relaxed and affectionate relationship with the children this affords. A third opined that she is much more likely to create a 'flash of light that changes everybody's whole perception' when she decides what she is going to teach instead of following a recipe. The belief that continuous review makes a better teacher was repeated in response to this question, as was the efficacy of sharing lesson ideas with colleagues. Importantly, one teacher reported that the inspectors are 'very happy' that the teachers are working without workbooks.

In addition to positive experiences creating such detailed curricular maps themselves, some teachers reflected on previous experiences working with lessons in the more mainstream way, 'straight out of the kit.' and identified a number of problems with that approach. "Teaching and learning can't be reduced to a series of verifiable steps," said one teacher. "The children's intelligence is not there to serve a curriculum, to assure that all share a given body of information."

It was argued that providing completed text and artwork does not help children develop their own talent. Another concluded from previous experience that children often dislike textbooks, and that less-able children often experience failure, a fact which becomes very evident to peers. When using workbooks, I was told, differentiating for pace of work is difficult, whereas a classroom full of children are never 'on the same page' regarding their mastery of a subject. Also, textbooks often provide a relatively passive and uninspiring experience. One teacher asks whether workbooks are checked for curricular accuracy by representatives of the Department of Education.

Contrariwise, a number of the teachers who are new to this approach saw problems with

rejecting pre-formed lessons and 'going it alone'. They identified value in using textbooks, such as the ease of setting up lesson plans for every month, by which one can document and assess one's progress. The systematic building up of particular skills was seen as a strength of workbooks, useful for some circumstances. Judicious use of such books can present clearly laid out information, in a way different from how the teacher might, and provide content that all children in the class process together. Nice resources were found by one teacher, who said there are beautiful workbooks available on the market. Another argument presented was that textbooks can provide a guide to children's needs at different stages, and can help assure teachers they are hitting the targets. It was pointed out that textbooks literacy is an important skill set to develop for secondary school. Also, one respondent observes that being able to rely on pre-cast lessons means that you don't have to think as much, or do as much research, which results in a great savings of effort.

Similar to those raised in favour of the use of textbooks, there were some voices raised against 'freestyle' teaching without them, which, it was felt, can leave gaps in learning areas. Researching and sourcing all the material oneself puts a lot of pressure on the teacher, and 'you're only as good as your game on the day'. One teacher observed that it is taxing to create lessons from scratch, to 'make up every single thing every single time,' demanding extra thought and time outside of school, and another worried that, without enough time to process, practice, and enjoy a lesson, it lacks depth. The need to find creative ways to quantify progress was also mentioned.

Most of the teachers were mostly positive about this 'freestyle' method of curriculum preparation. It was acknowledged that this approach works best when the teacher has developed a thorough knowledge of the particular group of children. One teacher summed it up thusly:

As a method, it places a different set of demands on the teacher from those required to deliver lessons from a book: knowing the subject and finding the particular character, the particular story, and the particular emphasis.



## Pedagogical Compromise

I feel on reflection that this was a difficult question for the interviewees to answer objectively. Compromise is so often seen as analogous to capitulation, that any group of teachers, or other professional, for that matter, would likely resist characterising changes in this way. To be fair, though, this group is sensitive to the reality of their situation, and two of the teachers spoke at length about the true nature of compromise, as a way for two bodies to achieve agreement.

Also, perhaps as a result of the relative newness of this arrangement, a number of respondents chose to speak of compromises that they have not yet made, but that they feel are either likely or inevitable in the future. It is useful to distinguish between compromises already made, and those expected.

Just over half of the teachers were able to identify compromises that they personally have made, or have seen the school community make, since recognition by the Department of Education and Skills. One teacher stated the obvious: “We follow the national primary school rules, and we implement the curriculum,” which is the central compromise from which all the following arise.

Whereas the kindergarten previously included children at the age of three, and allowed three years experience before moving onto class one, the schools are now required to enrol only children who have attained the age of four year, and limit the time spent in school before class one to two years. This effects both the individual children and the overall group dynamics. A number of teachers identified changes to the length of time in the school year and in each school day as an issue of compromise. Some felt that younger children should have a shorter day, or that the school should have the freedom to agree a calendar with its immediate community.

To comply with Departmental expectations, there is more time and effort spent keeping records, validating and justifying what is done. This is seen as a compromise, because it entails a sacrifice of what is perceived to be essential work of other sorts: focusing on normalised results and outcomes, instead of the whole process. There is a need to curtail or forego significant portions of the Waldorf curriculum of subject lessons, such as

Form Drawing, Painting, and Eurythmy, to make space to cover all elements of the Primary Schools Curriculum.

The requirement to employ state trained teachers, even if no state trained candidate has Waldorf training, is considered to be a fundamental shift in the hiring priorities of Raheen Wood, in particular (see section 2.1.6.1).

In creating a 'print rich environment' to meet inspectors' expectations, one teacher felt the need to 'busy' the classroom walls with posters and other forms of written text that she felt compromised the aesthetic of the learning space. Another teacher felt that the issue was a far more pervasive one of being subtly encouraged to 'perform' to the Inspectors cultural norms, and to ignore where that conflicted with her understanding of the Waldorf ethos.

Those teachers who identified areas of compromise they expect in the future spoke of similar concerns. These overlap with responses to the final interview question, regarding dangers to the Waldorf movement that could result from incorporation of these schools into the national system. As one teacher said, "We haven't necessarily yet made these compromises, because there has been no dialogue [with the Department of Education and Skills]". The most common compromises foreseen are in the area of early academics. I was told that to modify the integrated nature of early years Waldorf education, by specifically breaking the curriculum down into the nine subject areas, could result in a literal and principled loss of integrity. The formal teaching of literacy, mathematics and science before class one, and an intellectualised approach to these subjects in the lower and middle primary school years would be anathema to the anthroposophical view of the needs of children. Some had seen signs that an expectation to 'draw out' evidence of cognitive awareness in young children would be foisted upon them. Those teachers feel that to encourage children in their first seven years to question the world would lead to development of unnatural precocious individuality that might jeopardise their future educability.

The other concerns were in a similar vein. A requirement to bring regular computer usage and instruction before Class 3 would work against the pupils' power of imagination, said one teacher. Another was concerned that he saw indications that he

would be expected to forfeit depth of material in exchange for breadth, and to forgo the rhythm built into Main Lesson book structure of deep focus followed by rest. A few of the teachers were adamant that some changes, if required, would be intolerable.

### Serious Issues

Responses to this question can be said to fall into seven categories. In order of frequency, they are: *Overwhelm and Subsumption*, *Loss of Essential Core*, *Creeping Effect of Pedagogical Ignorance*, *Lack of Appreciation*, *Abstract Teaching Methods with Young Children*, *Loss of Staff Egalitarianism*, and *Other Concerns*. To highlight the commonality of comments within these themes, I have listed the number of respondents, out of the 11 total, who mentioned each concern. (Some teachers shared more than one concern within a given category.) Each general statement is followed by specific points voiced by individual teachers.

*Waldorf Education could be overwhelmed and subsumed by the culture of Primary Schools that exists in Ireland* (8 respondents). The capacity of this small group of teachers to advocate in an ongoing manner for full recognition of this pedagogical approach is limited. This endeavour is as strong as the people who hold it, and one teacher feels the whole situation is quite fragile. Both sides of the relationship must be able to remain true to themselves: otherwise, it results in a form of giving in, or a denial of one party to the relationship, where one becomes beholden to somebody else's rules and ideas, and the Waldorf impulse gets watered down. The sheer weight of experience and institutionality behind the primary school system and the Steiner school is so unbalanced, that the Steiner school is in great danger of just being totally blown off the face of the earth. Class teachers are planning lessons to incorporate unnecessary stuff, just to meet new requirements, at the expense of important curriculum, the workload for the Steiner teachers has doubled. Marrying these two approaches is a lot of work. There always was going to be a huge amount of study in reading oneself into all the main lessons in a Steiner school, but given the workload that goes with being a primary teacher, it takes every waking hour - that's not an exaggeration. When one tries to bring a peaceful and serene environment to the children, it can be very difficult if feeling constant stress.

*Steiner National Schools could lose the core/essence of Waldorf education* (5 respondents). It is not clear who 'holds' the essential core of what Steiner education is about. There is the fear of the core philosophy being diluted in the absorption process, and one teacher can see it losing some of its essence already. Understanding and holding the core vision of Steiner education will be a challenge. Working out of a developing relationship to Steiner education and the human being is essential, and cannot be sacrificed.

*The (effective) requirement to employ teachers without appropriate Waldorf training and/or experience could result in a creeping effect of pedagogical ignorance* (5 respondents). The practice of working from children towards a curriculum, and not the other way around, takes years to master. There are few options for training in Steiner teacher teaching open to Irish teachers, and none that are state recognised. Teachers hired without Waldorf training can try and educate themselves, but, the workload for the Steiner teachers has doubled, and there is little time and no funding for mentoring of new teachers. The current situation of some teachers knowledgeable of and others ignorant of Waldorf principles creates a conflict of understanding. Down the line, as new teachers replace old, there is a question of whether there will be a Waldorf presence on the faculties at all, if the situation is not remedied. Tellingly, one new teacher told me that, without an adequate Steiner training, she doesn't fully 'trust' the Steiner curriculum that she is expected to deliver.

*There is a lack of appreciation by Department of Education and Skills as to the strengths that Waldorf Education uniquely offers* (4 respondents). The Department of Education apparently don't see unique value in Steiner education. The inspectors are going to be looking at different targets, and they may determine the schools are so far away from the Primary School Curriculum, that they don't see how it would work. Steiner schools are being challenged to prove that they are just as valid, and the work is just as good. There is concern that the schools' own explanation of their pedagogy may not be coherent or clear enough to convince. This concern primarily arises from the observation that there is too short a time frame for integration of the Steiner approach into the Primary School Curriculum.

*The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills might require abstract and academic instruction methods to teach young children* (4 respondents). The expectations inherent in the Curriculum are that the early years teacher bring learning 'to consciousness,' and this approach is contrary to the Waldorf way. Immersion into the world of technology can be detrimental to children's development, but the state wants more. Requirements for literacy teaching in the kindergarten years could prove problematic. There is a worry about class one having school in the afternoons. One teacher feels that it would be 'our fault' if the schools are ultimately required to bring intellectualisation in too early, because 'we will have failed in convincing them' of the soundness of this approach.

*The egalitarian decision making and carrying of responsibilities among teachers that is unique to Waldorf education may be jeopardised by Department of Education and Skills school structural requirements* (2 respondents). Traditional Steiner schools work without a hierarchy among the faculty, whereas now, one is imposed, with a Principal teacher taking primary responsibility. This is a danger for this school, this model. Working as a College of Teachers is essential, and the schools cannot afford to sacrifice this.

*Other concerns* (1 respondent each). As a result of adopting the school funding structure of the Department, there has been a loss of assistant teachers for the youngest children in the school. There is a concern the teachers may be asked to sacrifice the main lesson structure for a more commonly implemented weekly rotation of all subjects. The school may be asked to stop cycling Class teachers up through the years with a particular group of children (looping). Loss of control of school calendar decisions is worrisome, as is the lack of support for teachers in integrating the Steiner and national school approaches.

## 4.2 Waldorf Training of Teachers at Steiner National Schools

When considering the viability of adopting a Waldorf approach in some select national schools, one serious question needs to be explored empirically, and that concerns the unique qualities and qualifications required of those who would teach in these new

schools. The literature clearly shows that the Waldorf approach emphasises pedagogy over curricula, *what* the teacher knows and brings is secondary to *how* the teacher teaches and *who* the teacher is. The body of teachers currently employed in the Steiner National Schools has members who have a great deal of anthroposophic educational theoretical knowledge and practical experience, and members who have relatively little. Individuals in both categories stated when interviewed that to achieve a full working knowledge of Waldorf teaching while also applying the Primary School Curriculum requires more than on-the-job training.

To be hired as a full time teacher in a recognised Irish primary school, candidates must possess a recognised Bachelor of Education degree, or its equivalent. (Raheen Wood Steiner National School retains two non-credentialed teachers, paying their salaries through funds raised in the school community. The Inspectorate has voiced concern over this.) The state imposes no restrictions on the hiring of teachers for independent primary schools. Irish Waldorf schools have traditional advertised training and experience specific to Waldorf schools as prerequisites for job applicants, though these qualifications are not always met. There is, both in Ireland and around the world, a dearth of qualified Waldorf teachers.

Until recently a small college in Clare offered three-year, part time training courses for individuals wishing to work in Waldorf schools, with programmes catering to the needs of Kindergarten, Class Teaching and Learning Support. These courses were validated by the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship of the UK and Ireland, but not by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, nor the Department of Education and Skills. Even in the case of the Fellowship, the term 'validated' can only be used loosely – which is not a reflection on the strength of the Irish Waldorf trainings per se, but rather on the state of development of the international Waldorf movement. In a Teacher Education Strategy document (2001) the Fellowship acknowledged that at present there is no defined mechanism for recognising a teacher as competent to teach in a Waldorf school, though course leader testimonials and references play a significant role in informing the potential employer of the level of training received and competence achieved. It goes on to say,

There is no obstacle to somebody teaching in a Steiner school even though they have had no training of any description. Many excellent teachers have been assimilated into our schools in this way. Many more have also failed to make the transition or acquire the necessary skills. For every failed teacher there are many more pupils who have been let down. A method of recognising and acknowledging 'Steiner Practitioner Status' could ensure that any move towards 'state-approved' QTS [Qualified Teacher Status] or similar is not at the expense of core Steiner-Waldorf content and methodology.

There are currently options for Waldorf teacher training in colleges throughout Europe, including programmes in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and England, many of which are recognised as meeting the criteria for graduates to be employed as full time primary teachers in their respective countries.

At the time that Lifeways, the patron body, received recognition for its two Steiner schools, there were a number of eligible candidates for positions who had both Waldorf training and Waldorf teaching experience. Even then, however, some of the posts had to be filled with individuals who met the state's generic qualifications, but who lacked Waldorf background. And in the few years since, all of the new positions opened as the schools have grown have been filled by Waldorf novitiates. As national schools, they cannot offer these teachers 'hard incentives' such as salary increases or unique conditional induction to encourage participation in ongoing professional development specific to Waldorf pedagogy.

Through consultation with teachers and administrative staff, I have compiled statistical data on the training and experience profiles of the teachers at the two schools, comparing the situation three years ago, just before recognition, to the situation at present. The data, expressed in the tables below, shows over the course of three years a significant drop in the number of teachers who carry what could arguably be termed the requisite attributes to teach using a Waldorf approach. Mol an Óige closed its doors as an independent school with 50% of its teachers having completed a Waldorf training programme, and 100% having taught one or more years in an independent Waldorf school, without the added challenge to deliver the Primary National Curriculum. In the

same year, Raheen Wood Steiner National School ended with 71% trained and 100% experienced. At that time, all teachers at both schools had received some amount of Waldorf training. For the 2010-2011 school year, those numbers had changed to 17% trained and 17% experienced for Mol an Óige, 33% trained and 44% experienced for Raheen Wood. This represents an overall drop of roughly 60% and 70% in Waldorf training and experience in the entire populace over three years.

The statement from the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship quoted at length above, seeing 'no obstacle to somebody teaching in a Steiner school' needs to be understood in the context in which it was meant. To be 'in a Steiner school' implies that the school is predominantly made of up Waldorf teachers. However loosely you define that adjective, it must mean something that describes the teacher, and the definition I propose, of engaging on a theoretical and practical level with Waldorf pedagogy through training and job related experience, would put into question the application of either the name 'Steiner' or 'Waldorf' for these schools at present. The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America Waldorf has trademarked the name 'Waldorf' and 'Rudolf Steiner' in the United States, to protect the use of that name. I asked Patrice Maynard, leader of Outreach & Development for the Association, how they would view a state funded 'Steiner School' where the majority of teachers lack Waldorf training, and she wrote that it 'would definitely be an infringement' on their trademark, and that such a school would not receive permission to call itself Steiner in the United States.

With the present state of affairs, each new job in Steiner national schools is more likely than not to be filled by someone whose only claim to being a Waldorf teacher is the very fact of their employment. Though it is fair to believe that each one, in the fullness of time, can become an excellent Waldorf pedagogue, the fact that they are now working in a environment with fewer and fewer seasoned Waldorf teachers to act as mentors and carry the ethos with assurance, and with little 'hard incentive' or even opportunity for anthroposophically orientated ongoing professional development courses, their success in this realm is less than assured.



*Comparison of Teacher Qualifications at Mol an Óige Steiner School:  
at end of full independent school status 30/6/08,  
and after three years of national school status 30/6/11*

| CREDENTIALS OF TEACHERS             | 2008                                 |         | 2011                                 |         |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|
|                                     | Out of 4 full time teachers employed |         | Out of 6 full time teachers employed |         |
|                                     | #                                    | %       | #                                    | %       |
| Irish Primary Teacher Certification | 1                                    | 25.00%  | 6                                    | 100.00% |
| Waldorf Certification               | 2                                    | 50.00%  | 1                                    | 16.67%  |
| Waldorf (independent) Experience    | 4                                    | 100.00% | 1                                    | 16.67%  |

*Comparison of Teacher Qualifications at Raheen Wood Steiner School:  
at end of full independent school status 30/6/08,  
and after three years of national school status 30/6/11*

| CREDENTIALS OF TEACHERS             | 2008                                 |         | 2011                                 |        |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|--------|
|                                     | Out of 7 full time teachers employed |         | Out of 9 full time teachers employed |        |
|                                     | #                                    | %       | #                                    | %      |
| Irish Primary Teacher Certification | 2                                    | 28.57%  | 7                                    | 77.78% |
| Waldorf Certification               | 5                                    | 71.43%  | 3                                    | 33.33% |
| Waldorf (independent) Experience    | 7                                    | 100.00% | 4                                    | 44.44% |

## 5 Analysis and Discussion

To explore the question of how Steiner's approach to education can enliven teaching, I will look at various aspects of the educational landscape, compared with solutions that Waldorf might offer.

The literature shows how the Waldorf method of synchronising curricular themes with child development can be of real usefulness (Finser, 1994, Zimmermann, 1994, Rawson & Masters, 1997, Heydebrand, 1998, Rawson & Richter, 2000, Oldfield, 2001, Petrash, 2002, Lissau, 2004). The unique perspective on the role of the teacher in the Waldorf school, both in his/her relationship to the children, and in the approach to research as a means of deriving and adapting methods and content, has also been shown to be an important aspect of what distinguishes Waldorf from other pedagogies. I will explore the question of how these can be reconciled with the Irish national curriculum and the established methods and procedures of Irish national schools.

On the surface, it appears that there are many areas in which the stated goals of the Primary Curriculum and those of the Waldorf movement are harmonious. This observation will be confirmed through comparison of the aims and objectives of each. Where there is discord, these places will be specifically identified. I will follow this review with a description of aspects arising from the practice of Waldorf pedagogy that could be beneficially employed possibly even in non Waldorf primary schools of Ireland.

Returning to the theme of contention between the philosophy expressed in the Primary Curriculum and that of anthroposophy, I will address in detail specific problems. First to consider will be the issues associated with the beginning of schooling for each child. Then, as how best to teach young children is a concern about which there are multiple viewpoints, it will be useful to add the Waldorf perspective. I will next explore the question of how many years should be contained in the primary cycle, at what age should that cycle end, and the advantage of teacher continuity with one group of children through the cycle. I will next consider the unique challenges facing schools in Ireland today around the issues of religion in an evolving national culture with a

multiplicity of faiths and, increasingly, calls for a faith-free option. Finally, I will explore the role of computers and other technology in the classroom, as seen from the perspective of the Department of Education and Skills, and from the quite different perspective of Waldorf educators.

## 5.1 Similarities

There is a surprising amount of similarity between the general aims of primary education according to the Department of Education's revised Primary School Curriculum and those voiced by the Waldorf movement, as a direct comparison will show. The introduction to the Curriculum (1999) lists as its general aims:

- To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- To enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning

In *The Educational Tasks & Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum*, Richter and Rawson (2003) have pulled together the most comprehensive English language reference book on the Waldorf curriculum to date. In this document, the tasks of Steiner Waldorf education are summarised as follows:

- Fostering healthy development in each individual child
- Enabling children to realise their potential
- Helping children to develop the skills they need to contribute to society

Or, to quote directly from Rudolf Steiner (1919c):

Idealism must work in the spirit of [the Waldorf] curriculum and methodology; but it must be an idealism that has the power to awaken in young, growing human beings the forces and faculties they will need in later life to be equipped for work in modern society and to obtain for themselves an adequate living.

A close reading of the rest of the introduction to the Curriculum shows that this

fundamental parity continues. There is nothing in any part of the 89 page document that is in conflict with the Waldorf ethos, and many statements that have particular harmonious resonance. Further, virtually all the broad objectives of the six curriculum areas are compatible with Waldorf primary approach, and all are echoed in the literature describing Waldorf practice and content. The few exceptions I found to the preceding statement are as follows: one English objective calls for the child 'to use computer technology in learning to write and for information retrieval,' one Music objective calls for the child 'to record compositions using electronic media,' and one Social Personal and Health Education objective calls for the child 'to develop a sense of personal responsibility and come to understand his/her sexuality and the processes of growth, development and reproduction' (1999). In Waldorf schools, these curricular goals are achieved in the teenage years (Rawson & Richter, 2000) in the time when Waldorf theory says that the pupils is well-situated for abstract thinking (Petrasch, 2002).

When the Primary Schools Curriculum itself is described in outline, the harmony with the Waldorf ethos continues. Nearly all content strands and strand units for each of the six areas of the curriculum are compatible with the Waldorf primary approach, in that they can be reasonably applied to divide the curriculum areas into smaller continuing thematic elements (the vertical curriculum described in section 2.1.4) and one could expect to find content for each Curriculum strand and strand unit at each of the stated age levels in the Steiner National Schools. The exceptions I found are as follows:

- Gaeilge na téamaí An Teilifís for infant classes and for first and second classes
- English strand units Reading and Writing for infant classes
- Mathematics strands for infant classes
- Mathematics strand Measurement and strand unit Fractions for first and second classes
- Mathematics strand units Decimals and Chance for third and fourth classes
- Geography strand unit Planet Earth in Space for infants, first second, third and fourth classes
- Science strand Energy and Forces for infants, first second, third and fourth classes
- Music strand unit Talking about and Recording Compositions for infant classes
- Music strand unit Literacy for first and second classes
- Social Personal and Health Education strand unit Media Education for infant classes

Although this list appears significant in size, it represents a tiny fraction of the curriculum. The distinctions that do exist cannot be easily dismissed however, as all arise from the different view of child development which some have argued represents the ethos of the Steiner schools. Rather than dismissing these differences, I will engage them as the chapter continues.

However, with those few caveats, it is reasonable to conclude that adopting a Waldorf educational approach in Irish national schools should be both possible and advantageous in many ways; to children, teachers and community. The general aims of both are in such agreement as to be nearly interchangeable. In broad objectives there is full harmony, and in content strands there is a high level of concordance between what is described in the Primary Curriculum and what Waldorf education endeavours to offer.

## 5.2 Beneficial Aspects of Waldorf

The adoption of the Waldorf approach by the Department of Education and Skills as one of the choices for primary education offered to its citizens is an exciting development. As shown in the previous section, this approach is compatible with the aims and objectives identified in the Primary School Curriculum, and it offers a fresh perspective on meeting those goals as well. From the review of the literature and the interviews with teachers, I believe that many aspects of the Waldorf approach are worthy of further consideration, and possibly even adoption in other schools in the primary system of Ireland, as beneficial tools by which to implement the curriculum 'in the spirit that it's meant to be taught'.

Waldorf education puts the teachers at the heart of the school, and the children at the heart of the schooling. Learning results from the relationship between teacher and child. The curriculum is the mechanism for that meeting, and it is a body of knowledge that evolves predominantly 'at the grass roots level,' informed by the research of the individual teacher. In contrast, primary education as it is commonly practised in Ireland today places the Curriculum, a body of knowledge that evolves predominantly 'from the top down' through the consensus of experts, informed by academic research, at the

centre of the learning experience.

A great deal of individual autonomy and responsibility is entrusted to the Waldorf teachers in their occupation. Before and alongside the work to develop salutogenetic relationships with each child, they must work on their own self development.

Meditation and other objective reflective practices are essential tools to acknowledge and reconcile with personal traits and predilections that may compromise the ability to devote oneself fully to the educational needs of the individuals to whom the teacher commits her efforts. The non-hierarchical structure of the College of Teachers offers solidarity and support, while necessitating each individual's involvement with the whole of the school through group decision making processes. By researching and sourcing material specific to her class, the teacher is able to stand as an authority, literally the author of the lessons she brings. This care-taking of the overall educational process leads to personal growth and great fulfilment, and makes for a creative, satisfying and rewarding career.

After the unique perspective on the ways in which the teacher self relates, the next area to consider is the quality of relationship she is expected to develop with the children. The approach to child development that arises from an anthroposophical view of the human being concerns itself with the physically, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual being of the child. Identifying thinking, feeling, and willing as sequentially dominant yet ever present modes of learning through early human life serves as a tool to develop multifaceted learning experiences that speak to all learning styles and to the wholism in each individual. Acknowledging the spiritual aspect to the children can help the teacher to perceive them as equals, from which she learns as much as they from her. She endeavours to offer an environment balanced between meeting general needs of all children at a developmental stage and one that is individuated in such a way as to facilitate self-directed, self-initiated learning, involving her confidence in each child's innate intelligence and learning capacity. She weaves the lessons in such a way as to allow scope for children to enthusiastically teach one another, both to build healthy social structure and as a matter of pragmatic efficiency. She strives to be worthy of emulation, thereby instilling care and pride in the children's own work, and respect for the work of others. She knows the pedagogical value of working intently and

intensively with curricular themes and then letting them go to rest, as a waking/sleeping cycle, to facilitate the consolidation of memories. Through utilising age appropriate integration of an artistic and aesthetic element, she engages the child's feelings, emphasising sensory experiences from which intellectual outcomes can arise. Finally, the teacher employs creative means by which to quantify progress of each, assessing holistically, against the standard of what she believes to be the unique potential of that individual child at each stage of development.

The third area of the Waldorf approach worthy of consideration is that of lesson development. Waldorf teachers do not use textbooks in the way that they are intended, as thorough guides to approach each strand and strand unit in the curriculum (Educational Company of Ireland, n.d.). When used by Waldorf teachers, textbooks comprise one element in a collection of source material by which a teacher informs herself on a subject area so as to create original lessons. This method lends itself to a more active and dynamic classroom experience, both in the teacher's delivery and the pupils' response. Rather than choosing specific themes based on meeting a quota for each subject area, the Waldorf teacher plots an entire primary years course, based on a curriculum map of cultural progression that brings themes at stages that harmonise with the developmental phases of childhood. The keynotes of Goodness Beauty and Truth function as anchors for this pedagogical vision of evolving childhood, with great adaptability to meet the changing needs of society as a whole, the school community, and of the individuals in the specific classroom. By creating her original lessons from her own research, and employing the techniques of child observation and self reflection mentioned above, she is able to relate the content back to experiences with which the pupils can strongly identify.

Instead of the predominantly intellectualised approach to teaching common today, Waldorf pedagogy utilises the anthroposophical view of human development as a guide leading to aesthetically nourishing education of children at each stage of maturation. Through this multi-sensory, integrated curricular approach, academic knowledge can be achieved alongside active cultivation of imagination, as well as healthy social conscience. The adaptability and flexibility of this teaching approach lends itself to efficacy with all learning styles and temperaments. The breathing rhythm of the day,

week, month, and year, expressed foremost in the three day story cycle, allows complete absorption of experiences. artistic activity at the heart: drawing, painting and composing in words. It leads as well to individuated, rather than normalised results, honouring the unique potential of each child.

As shown previously (section 2.1.4), Waldorf education has its own curriculum. Not only is there entirely novel subject areas from the Primary School Curriculum, such as Eurythmy and Form Drawing, but the approach to the common subjects is often weighted differently. As an example, the Waldorf approach calls for a gradually increasing emphasis on Science over the course of the primary years, in line with the perceived developmental needs and capacities of the growing children (Stockmeyer, 1969), whereas the 1999 Curriculum recommends the same time be assigned to it each year. When the patron body agreed with the Department of Education that it would follow the Primary School Curriculum in its Steiner national schools, the attempt was made to build it into the pre-existing curricular structure traditional to Waldorf schools, but this is sure to fail. In English speaking countries, Waldorf schools teach English and two other languages, chosen appropriate to their communities. Irish is given ample space in the standard curriculum, but an additional language has to fit within discretionary time, in addition to weekly lessons devoted to Waldorf subjects such as Painting and Handwork. The time framework that is 'suggested' as a 'guideline' (1999) in the Introduction to the Curriculum recommends minimum amounts of time per week a teacher should devote to each subject area, such as 3 hours of Mathematics and 1 hour for Physical Education. Although this approach can readily be applied to the subject lessons that make up 3 out of 5 hours in the school day, it would be too prescriptive for the fluid combining of subject matter and rhythmic deepening-and-resting of curriculum areas that is a hallmark of Waldorf main lesson time, which occurs during the first two hours in each day. In this approach, Mathematics may be taught only 1 hour in one week, and 6 hours the next, and there may be 3 or more hours of Physical Education in a week when, for instance, the fifth class children are learning about Ancient Greece while preparing to compete in an intra-school Olympiad as part of that theme. In place of an easily compartmentalised and quantified curricular structure, multi-faceted Waldorf main lessons provide time to enter into subjects intensively. They bring qualitative depth and wholism of subject matter, working out of large themes chosen



through the application of Steiner's theory of the mirroring of cultural development in the life of each human being.

Another example of the difficulty in reconciling the two curricula is met when we consider the Waldorf subject of Handwork. The 1999 Curriculum places all work with textiles as a small subset of the visual arts curriculum area, along with Drawing, Painting, Print Making, Clay, and Construction. If one were to give equal weight to each subsection, the recommendation is for 30 minutes per week. On the other hand, the Waldorf curriculum calls for 90 minutes of Handwork, including complete projects in knitting, crocheting, cross-stitch, macrame, spinning, weaving, felting, sewing, and shoemaking, over the course of the primary years (Mitchell & Livingston, 1999). Examples of this sort could be pulled from any of the seven curriculum areas, showing that there is no sacrifice in breadth for depth, but rather an effective curricular approach that allows for both.

This review illustrates many potent and practical ways that Waldorf educators have of teaching today's children. More than 75 years of experience, research, and adaptation has resulted in a system that has great benefits for pupils and for teachers. It could be that, through further study, aspects of this approach could be employed more broadly in other types of national schools. I believe, at the least, that it would behoove the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to familiarise itself with this approach, to inform future curricular revisions.

### 5.3 School Readiness

From the moment of birth, and even before, human beings learn. In the first years of life, we go through a long period in which we learn through playing and by experience, and also absorb information from external memory, the vast mass of externally prepared and stored information which is accumulated through, for instance, storytelling (Davidmann, 2006). This is predominantly informal learning. If school is defined as a place primarily devoted to formal instruction, then it is a clear contention of Waldorf pedagogy that school must only begin after the child has turned six, sometime during his seventh year of life. Any programme where abstracting of experience is carried out before that is too early. The soundness of this viewpoint was recently confirmed by the

Cambridge Review, the most extensive review into primary education in England in 40 years, which concurs with the Steiner approach on a later start to schooling. The authors wrote,

We are convinced that a later start to formal learning allows children to experience the joy of learning without unhealthy stress or the risk of early burn-out (Finn, 2009).

In this area, it is difficult to say whether Waldorf is in line with Department of Education expectations, because the Department is rather capricious with its position on the subject. The Waldorf perspective is very clear, with sound reasoning to back it up, and this could prove to be one of the areas in which the partnership will be most fruitful.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the body responsible for the creation of the Primary School Curriculum has more recently developed an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework called Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Distinct from the forming of the 1999 Curriculum, representatives of Waldorf education were involved in the consultative process for this document, which perhaps had some bearing on the fact that the framework's philosophy, vision and aims are even more closely aligned with those of Waldorf education than are the ones set forth in the Primary School Curriculum.

The authors note that early childhood refers to the period from birth to six years, while primary education caters for the period from six to 12 years, although in reality most five-year-olds and about half of the country's four-year-olds attend primary school. To meet this reality, the 1999 Curriculum lays out the educational approach to be taken with children age 4 through 12. Obviously, there is an overlap of two years, the time during which children are in infant classes in mainstream school settings, or kindergarten in Waldorf terminology. And it is with this overlap that I concern myself here.

The Department of Education has something of a quandary with infant education, in that the approach needed to properly educate children of this age is so fundamentally

different from later primary years, and Aistear appears to be a valid attempt to address it. But it is not yet clear whether Aistear is meant to replace the 1999 Curriculum, as regards this age group. In an audit of the similarities and differences between the two, Aistear is characterised as a modifying initiative rather than a successor to the infant sections of the Primary School Curriculum, and they are 'seen as complementing each other' (NCCA, 2009). The authors seem to say something entirely different, though, when later in the same document they are described as 'two curriculum approaches,' and in the conclusion of the report it states 'a critical question remains to be answered concerning the status of Aistear vis-à-vis the Curriculum' (NCCA, 2009). One respondent to an INTO Education Committee survey of teachers' views on implementation of the Curriculum spoke of her frustration with the Government's unclear expectations on caring for young children. Referring to required child-adult ratios, she said, "This week in play school it can be 1:10 and next week, let's face it, in primary school it can be 30:1 and they still have the same needs" (Craith and Fay, 2007).

If the two are to exist side by side for some time to come, then the similarities are superfluous, and the differences are crucial, for they will need to be engaged and rectified. The key distinctions between the Aistear and the Curriculum follow. Firstly, Aistear uses a practice-oriented approach. In contrast, the Curriculum uses a more theory-oriented approach. Secondly, when presenting the content of children's learning, although both prioritise knowledge skills, and attitudes, Aistear makes explicit reference to developing children's dispositions, as well. Thirdly, Aistear emphasises holistic and integrated learning, while the Curriculum presents the content of children's learning through divided curriculum areas, and suggests theme-based units of work combining elements from various subjects. Fourthly, as part of its more analytical approach, the Curriculum calls for specific time allotments for the various subject areas. Aistear does away with this. Fifthly, Aistear takes significant steps to de-emphasise literacy and numeracy expectations. Sixthly, while the Curriculum gives limited attention to learning through play, Aistear endorses the centrality of play and activity in children's early learning. Finally, although the aims articulated by each are similar, the Curriculum places importance on laying foundations for the 'next' stage of learning, while Aistear 'celebrate(s) early childhood ... as a time of being rather than becoming' (DES, 1999,

NCCA, 2009). Therefore, while there is nothing wrong with having an awareness of next steps, and the audit of the two is at pains to point out that Aistear, too, emphasizes the importance of laying foundations, the problem arises when 'laying foundations' is interpreted to mean bringing academic abstractions into the educational life of the young child. The Curriculum suggests that interpretation, while Aistear does not.

Because its priorities are less detailed and more descriptive in nature, Aistear appears to leave greater room for interpretation and consequently allow more freedom of approach. An example is found within Aistear's theme of Exploring and Thinking, where it states:

In partnership with the adult, children will use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others' experiences. (A3, LG5)

There remains a question of interpretation. If by 'use letters, words, sentences and numbers' the authors intend that children be instructed in literacy, this goal would be counter to the Waldorf ethos, and to research findings. Gardner (1991) summarises the evidence by stating that it is no accident that in most societies children do not begin statutory schooling until the age of six or seven, since it is only at that stage that they can usefully deal with symbol systems such as print. If their 'use' can be limited to orality, sometimes referred to as pre-literacy skills (although they are much more than that), there is no conflict. It then would be possible to adopt this aim in a Waldorf setting, while still working in such a way as to curtail the advancement of academisation into early years experience.

The NCCA is engaged in a review (no announced completion target date) informed by Aistear, of the Infant Level of the Primary School Curriculum starting with the language area. So there is reason to hope that the more child centred and developmentally appropriate perspectives voiced in Aistear will be influential toward a new way of looking at early childhood education in Ireland, including the time up to class one. The Waldorf movement should be seen as harbingers of this new more enlightened approach to working that respects the integrity of childhood.

## 5.4 Age Appropriate Learning within Curriculum Stages

In the second half of the twentieth century, educational theorists in the United States like Carl Bereiter, Siegfried Engelmann, and E. D. Hirsch introduced early academic programs based on behaviourist learning theories (Elkind, 1987). These lead to the development of an entire industry in books and other media to teach academic subjects at home, even down to the infant stage of life, and have had a pernicious effect on early childhood education around the globe. Assuming that learning follows the same principles at all age levels, and that the sooner a child masters critical thinking skills the better, this picture of early learning ignores children's developing abilities and denies any special quality to childhood, where trustworthy impulses should be allowed to develop and run their course (Hirsch, 1996). Waldorf educators have articulated a compelling argument against this belief that education is a race, and provided a child-centred alternative to formal instruction for children under six years of age.

- Rather than taking a clear position on this question, the 1999 Primary Curriculum is contradictory on its stance toward an appropriate educational approach for children age 4 and 5. Children in Ireland can attend primary school from the age of four (or three, from 'disadvantaged' areas, under the Delivering Equality of Schools action plan). Compulsory attendance is from six years of age until sixteen. On the one hand, Infants classes are places where free play is permitted and even emphasised, and little formal learning is brought. On the other, learning outcomes of an academic nature are defined, and their achievement advocated, and determined through standards based assessment.

Though not mandatory, the majority of four and five year olds have traditionally been enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (Coolahan, 1981). Projections are for significant growth in early years education over the coming decades. The Primary Curriculum recognises the 'informality of the learning experience' in the infant classes, yet calls for learning outcomes that can only arise from the formal teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills (DES, 1999). Anecdotally, it is said that infant teachers are often pressured by parents, school principals, and the teachers of classes above them to introduce formal learning, even when it goes against their own judgement of how best to work with young children (see interviews). Former English Education Minister

Vernon Coaker said a starting age of six for formal education would be too late, and completely counter-productive (Curtis, 2007), yet the Cambridge Primary Review found that children should not start formal learning until they are six. Instead, the kind of play-based learning featured in nurseries and reception classes should go on until then. It found no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit, but there are suggestions it can do some harm. In fact, some researcher suggest that an early introduction of didactic curricula may increase anxiety and impact negatively on both self-esteem and longer-term motivation to learn (Elkind, 1987, Elley, 1994, Alexander, 2009). Finland, which consistently ranks at the top of all Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries for educational attainment, and has among the highest per capita number of PhDs in Europe, is currently unique among European countries in allowing formal schooling to start at age seven (Wikipedia, 2011).

Waldorf Kindergarten teachers specialise in non-academic education. Working out of an anthroposophical view of the developing human being, they do not consider attempts to begin teaching children literacy, mathematics and logic-based scientific knowledge before their seventh year to have pedagogical integrity. The word curriculum stems from the Latin word for race course, and the first seven years may be looked at as training for the course ahead, rather than an actual joining in the race. The inspectors from the Department of Education have identified the lack of abstraction as a weakness in the practice of the infant classes in Steiner national schools. This manifests in the following example, shared by a teacher at Raheen Wood school, after an inspectorate visit. The school inspector asked a kindergarten child, "Do I need a match to light the light?" a question to which the child could offer no immediate answer. Whether this finding of fault comes from a conscious rejection or ignorance of the philosophical underpinnings of Waldorf settings is not certain. The Department of Education agreed to no special treatment when setting the terms of recognition of these schools, including no 'homework' requirement of individual inspectors to familiarise with Waldorf education before undertaking school assessments, and early indications are that these schools are being evaluated with the same yardstick as any other primary school.

To be fair to the Inspectorate, they have asked the schools to give more detailed descriptions of their characteristic spirit, and how they uniquely intend to accomplish the goals of the 1999 Curriculum and have received thus far a less than complete response. One of the teachers summed up for me his perspective on the schools' position on this: "We'll be academically one year behind other schools at the beginning, but not at the end."

I question, though, whether the task should fall to the schools alone to articulate how the Curriculum can be met (and, indeed, enhanced) through a Waldorf approach, or whether the Department itself, with relatively vast resources and a deep knowledge of its own curriculum in its institutional lifeblood, should not engage some portion of this work, if indeed it intends to stand behind the operation of these schools. Perhaps a working group could be called by the Minister for Education comprised of members of the inspectorate, the NCCA and individuals with Waldorf expertise to explore this question.

As a parent and former teacher at one of the schools, I have been privy to a number of 'car park conversations' where often half-baked solutions are freely offered. I have heard it said that the schools can do a few things that make it look like they are compliant with the inspectors' interpretations of the 1999 Curriculum recommendations for early formal learning, without actually becoming compliant. To my mind, this would be a far more serious breach of ethos and integrity than finding a novel way to meet the 'letter of the law.'

In some details, particularly to do with the age at which pre literacy moves to literacy, as well as the use of educational technologies in the classroom, I foresee some philosophical translation issues. I hope that my work can shed some light on these areas, and support the process.

Another possibility worthy of consideration would be for the Steiner National Schools to operate their kindergartens in a way that is separate from the rest of the primary school. If Lifeways were to adopt this approach, the care and education of children before class one would be less regulated toward academics, and a three year preschool

cycle could be offered, an issue brought up repeatedly to me by the early childhood Waldorf teachers.

The Steiner curriculum has as its basis a picture of the human being developing through life phases, each of which last seven years, and recognises a fundamental shift in consciousness near the end of the first phase, when the child is six years old. Children come to 'school' before their seventh year, but kindergarten has little resemblance to class one. There are no desks, pencils or books, and most, importantly, no academic instruction. You can certainly identify a 'kindergarten curriculum' (as described in Jaffke, 1996, Oldfield, 2001, Peck, 2004, Foster, 2005), but it is of such fundamental difference from what comes next as to justify the word picture of moving from a 'garden' to a 'school'. If the new Aistear Early Year Curriculum Framework is an indication of a movement in primary schools away from academic methods and content in the infant years, the learning expectations for children in classes one two and three in national schools will become at least less discordant with, and, one would hope, more harmonious with, those of the Waldorf schools. This aspect will be explored in the next section.

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## 5.5 Duration of 'Primary' Education

Literature exploring the Waldorf primary level curriculum usually describes an eight year journey, beginning in the year when children turn seven, and culminating in the year they turn fourteen (Finser, 1994, Petrash, 2002). Steiner created an eight year rather than a seven year cycle, which would have been more harmonious with his developmental schema, as a compromise needed to allow the school to operate within Germany at the time of its inception (Stockmeyer, 1969). In the last section I looked at the picture of age appropriate learning in the early years, from the clear standpoint of Waldorf pedagogy, and from the evolving one of the State. Focusing now on the second phase of childhood, and leaving aside the infants / kindergarten years, another significant concern for those working to establish Steiner National Schools is how to reconcile the eight year Waldorf primary curriculum, ending usually in the year children turn fourteen, with the six year Primary School Curriculum, which ends two years earlier, when children turn twelve.



In most Waldorf schools it is considered ideal to have a single adult act as the class teacher for a group of children all the way through their primary years, a practice often referred to as looping. Whereas many other schools eschew this approach, believing that the child may form too strong an attachment to the individual teacher, it is precisely for the reason of forming strong relationship that this pupil-teacher continuity is fostered in Waldorf schools. By becoming deeply aware of each child's learning patterns and behaviour, the class teacher is then in a position to adapt the content and approach of the curriculum to meet the needs of the individuals in the class. Ideally, each class teacher would be able to see and understand how each child should be met in order for her or him to develop the greatest inner freedom within the framework of what today's world offers and expects of each individual. More and more children are challenged in learning to calculate, read, and write, and the meeting of additional needs in the classroom is supported through relationship built over longer periods than a single ten month school year, where children can progress through school with an adult guide, who shows a deep and abiding interest in them.

In my experience as a Waldorf teacher for fifteen years both in the U.S. and Ireland I have witnessed the achievement of this ideal of a full primary cycle with a single teacher with approximately half the classes I am aware of, with the other half having two or more teachers to bring them through primary years. In the experience of Eugene Schwartz, an eminent freelance Waldorf lecturer and advisor to schools, 40% of U.S. Waldorf class teachers teach all eight years with one single class. So, whereas the eight year journey is considered ideal, it is far from universally achieved. Nonetheless, a required ending to the relationship between a teacher and her class after a maximum of six years would have, one must assume, a detrimental effect on the ability of schools to implement the Waldorf approach in the way it is intended.

Programmes for gifted students often arise from worry about more intellectually advanced children being weighed down and held back by the slower ones. In Waldorf schools, children with advanced intellectual capacities are not skipped up a class, no more than children even with relatively severe intellectual difficulties are held back. Instead, all children are kept in the same class as others of their age, and consequently, soul-developmental, group. Because primary subjects as taught in the Waldorf schools

contain so much more than cognitive content, teachers generally find that intellectually advanced children have areas where their development lags behind that of their peers: they may be relatively backward in artistic work, physical coordination or social skills. I was privileged to once overhear a boy in my class one say to some of his classmates, with the enthusiasm of discovering a gem of knowledge in his voice, “You know, everybody in this class is the best at one thing or another.” If children who are uniquely skilled in a particular subject or activity are encouraged to help others who are less gifted, they will learn at an early age that it is a privilege to possess such gifts, carrying with it a social responsibility (Easton, 1995).

In an interview with Pearse O’Shiel, representative for Lifeways, the patron body for the Steiner national schools and former Waldorf class teacher, he reported that the question of how many years the children would stay with the class teacher is not yet resolved. Initially it was thought by some Waldorf teachers that the eight years of Waldorf content could be arranged so as to fit into a six year national framework, though he feels this is surely impossible. Another idea being explored is to create a seven year model, providing children with an optional one year extension to their primary schooling. Because this would create uncertainties with the subsequent journey through the secondary system, the Department of Education unsurprisingly is not in favour of this plan, and has indicated their displeasure through a preliminary inspection report to one of the schools. A ban on such a practice is expressly stated in Primary Circular 11/01 *Retention of Pupils in Primary Schools*, issued by the Department of Education and Science in March of 2001:

Under the Department’s policy, children should only repeat a year for educational reasons and under no circumstances should an additional grade level operate through the retention of all or a substantial number of pupils for a second year at a grade level.

The Department further clarified its position in Primary Circular 32/03 *Retention of Pupils in Same Grade in Primary Schools*, issued in December, 2003:

A school must not operate a middle infants class or a repeat sixth class/ seventh class. In the event that a school continues the practice of enrolling pupils in a

middle infant or a repeat class the Department will discount the pupils in such classes for the purpose of determining the valid enrolment of the school. Capitation and other grants in respect of such pupils shall not be paid.

If, in time, the patron body for Steiner National schools establish and operate secondary schools, as is the practice with most other patrons, the issues on the upper end of the primary years may solve themselves, as the point of school leaving, the final reckoning with the Departmental inspectors, would be moved back to a point when, near the latter half of what Steiner advocates consider the intellectual phase of development, the pupils should be able to meet or surpass all mainstream learning expectations.

## 5.6 Religion

If future human catastrophes are to be averted, a chance and a hope may lie in creating and sharing forms of education that meet and address the differences within people and between people and that are founded in tolerance, compassion and cultural understanding (Clouder, 2009).

In addressing the questions of religious education in schools, there are two obvious approaches one could take. The first, adopted by legal precedent throughout the publicly funded schools of the United States and other countries, is to disallow any religious content. As religion is such a significant feature of human society, this approach is contentious, and leads immediately to the question of whether morality and ethics education can and should be completely divorced from religion. A second approach is to allow the community's majority religion to determine the entire curriculum of the schools or, as is the case in Ireland, a circumscribed portion of the curriculum. The arrangement can be viable from the perspective of the various church interests, especially when catering to relatively segregated communities. When there is a multiplicity of faiths in each area, however, this arrangement brings resentment in the minorities. Waldorf locates its own viewpoint in a third realm, trying to open up the religious font that is the child's right as a human being, without dogma or doctrine. Rather than simply studying various religions, however, the Waldorf curriculum identifies a number of religions as having arisen in different peoples, at different times, and representing different stages in the evolution of human consciousness. This does

not suggest a hierarchy, as if to say that one is primitive and another enlightened, but rather than each represents a distinct way of perceiving the world and humankind's place in it. Applying the theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (see section 2.1.3.2), Steiner recommends that the myths and legends (arguably religions' lifeblood) from various cultures be presented by teachers in a sequence that corresponds with the developmental phases of children, and that these can be the central motifs around which the lessons for a year, or portion of a year, can be structured. For instance, the core theme for class three in Waldorf schools is the myths of the Hebrew peoples, not specifically because they are the foundational stories to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, but for the life's lessons they contain, which can go a long way toward addressing the concerns often felt by children around their eighth and ninth years of life.

For many teachers in Waldorf schools it is enough to tell selections from the cycle of stories over the course of the year, and to use them as launching points for other curricular content. From Adam and Eve being cast from the Garden, classes often study shelter building, usually by supporting the class in building one or more of their own shelters. From the dimensions God gave Moses when commanding him to build the Ark, the teacher might launch into measurement aspect of mathematics study, and the children pace out the cubits on a large field. Some Waldorf teachers seek to give the children a full sensory experience of diverse religions. This is not a lesson that studies another religion in the way that study, as commonly defined, requires abstract objectivity. This is a direct experience of another religion. Although it is a facsimile, it is not a farce. This is drama, but with similar aspirations to the real thing. It is worth noting that these lessons would not usually be thought of as religion lessons in Waldorf schools. As part of the Main Lesson, they serve as a vehicle through which any number of curricular areas can be brought. This point may become clearer when one considers that the Ancient Norse and Ancient Persia are two examples of cultures whose myths and ways of life are regularly featured at the appropriate stage in the primary years.

Waldorf has as a goal, then, to provide, without any element of indoctrination, a faith forming experience. In later primary years, such a mood is created when learning about the Hindu deities, the Path of Buddha, and the coexistence with nature achieved by the

Native American Plains Indians. Each culture had and has a unique set of rituals for connecting to the spiritual world, and each forms a unique relationship to the spiritual, but share the goal to form faith in the celebrant, so that they will revere life and see the dignity in others. In this sense, all religions can be seen as being one under the surface, and it is the universal element that receives emphasis. The task of the Waldorf teacher, from kindergarten through class five at least, is to find examples from human culture's great diversity that will serve to inspire the individual to connect with the human family (Steiner, 1916). A great strength of the Waldorf methodology, as stated previously, is the freedom it allows the teacher to make these choices. Waldorf schools exist and thrive in places where there is no separation between school and church (or mosque, or temple) and where there is legal separation.

Rudolf Steiner was faced with this dilemma when parents requested religious education in the first school. His own complex relationship with organised religion, as explored by Hinde (1996), is worth considering. Similar to that of many contemporaries, Rudolf Steiner attended church as a child and received religious instruction at school, but he stopped attending church before the age of fourteen. In the religion of his time he saw resigned devotion to revelations of the past and inappropriate claims to power, lost in abstractions and separated from everyday experience. He turned to natural science, a field where he found people unafraid to ask questions. But already as a small child Steiner had direct experience of spiritual beings in a spiritual world. After this description, Hinde states that belief in God or a higher world was never a question of faith for Steiner.

The school in Stuttgart was established as a unitary school, an extraordinary innovation at that time. In the opening address, Steiner clearly stated that the school does not and never will teach anthroposophy (Easton, 1995). In response to the need to bring Religion into the curriculum, Steiner created a plan that looked very much like the latest one in Ireland, being piloted in the Community National Schools patroned by the V.E.C., where religious instruction is to be offered in the denominations requested by parents, by individuals with expertise in those denominations.

Most of what can be called Religion was brought through 'stories of the world'. This

is, in fact, the name of the religion curriculum being taught in the Irish Steiner National Schools, and has many similarities to the other multi-denominational approaches in Ireland. Additionally, just as Educate Together attempted in its first decade, and the Community National Schools are attempting in a limited way, children were divided into groups for religious lessons, and taught from the perspective of a chosen faith, by a representative of that faith. I use the term 'chosen faith' in a specific way, though, because parents, and then older children, were allowed to choose which group to attend, regardless of family perspective (Easton, 1995). Waldorf schools when pioneered independently, both in Northern Ireland and the Republic, rejected the idea to separate the children for specific religious education, and the Steiner National schools have continued with this policy of complete integration. Like most Educate Together schools, they have voiced their willingness to provide space outside school hours for faith formation programmes organised by parents, and this has not yet been taken up.

Steiner's ideas are accessible to all cultures and religions. A Waldorf school in Egypt has a mosque at its centre, a school in Thailand embraces Buddhism; a publicly funded school in Hawaii celebrates the folk religious beliefs and practises of the Hawaiian people; in most of the Western world, non denominational Christianity is at the core of the schools' ethos. The eminently adaptable pedagogy means that each school is autonomous and free to integrate its community's culture.

A perspective that should be heard in the great debate taking place in Ireland today over the questions of religions, faith, and indoctrination in the primary school is the one formed from the experience of the international Waldorf education movement. Its own agenda in this regard is neither to promote a particular faith or creed, nor to promote the censor of religion from public education. The Waldorf approach instead centres itself on the needs and rights of children, as members of a global family, who can be prepared to ultimately create their own relationship to the rest of the human community and to the metaphysical world in full knowledge and freedom.

## 5.7 Information and Communication Technology

I have previously voiced the arguments against the early formal educational approach, where literacy and other abstract thought processes are taught to children in their first

seven years, working contrary to their developmental needs, and necessitating the sacrifice of time from more appropriate imaginatively based content and experiences. The concerns expressed by Waldorf educators and others toward the misapplication of intellectualised education practices do not end when the child enters class one, however. From a child centred developmental perspective, there is a strong case against the majority of the Information and Communication Technology curriculum guidelines and recommendations throughout the primary years (Elkind, 1987, Pearce, 1992, Stoll, 1996).

When computers and other similar technology are used in education, humanistic qualities and values such as emotions, intuition, and aesthetics are, for the most part, disregarded. Many of the maths and language programmes created for use in schools turn computers into behaviourist training machines. From the chess playing machine 300 years ago to the latest supercomputer, the tool has no means by which to find out whether the behaviour it requires from the user and the conclusions that it reaches still make sense in a special new situation. Human judgement, on the other hand, is presence of mind. To be in the moment requires a form of active passivity, whereas using a computer too often pulls us toward passive activity. Ernst Schuberth, Director of the Waldorf Education Seminar in Mannheim, Germany, has described the computer as an intelligence without morality, a device designed entirely out of abstract thoughts (1999).

Furthermore, technology in the classroom is a great drain on educational resources, with scant evidence of efficacy. Governments have rushed into acquiring vast amounts of machinery, ignoring the fact that computers three or more years old are considered to be on the edge of obsolescence (Teach 42, 2008). A school system in Maine plans to provide all kindergarteners with an iPad 2 next year. Each subsequent kindergarten class will receive individual devices as well. It will cost the district at least \$200,000 per year, with Apple cutting a small percentage off the retail price (CNN, 2011). Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Inc. seems to suggest that the costs could be made up in cuts in human resources. He says, "We're getting closer to where you can make devices that become a friend and not just a computerized textbook.[...] So I think someday a computer could possibly be a teacher." (Reuters News Agency, 2011)

Contrary to the those who show great enthusiasm for this trend, Clifford Stoll, a leading authority on computer security and lecturer at the University of California Berkeley, calls for caution on the use of technology in the classroom. Stoll goes so far as to say that, in tomorrow's classrooms, it will be the underprivileged children who will use computers the most frequently, while the children of affluent societies will have real live teachers (1996).

Very likely, computers, whether PCs or smart phones or something unimagined, will play some feature in the future lives of most children born today. So the question of how much technology should be brought into the classroom is worthy of far more consideration. But all we have available is today's technology, which will certainly be gone tomorrow. There is no way for you to know, reading this, whether I spoke all the words of this dissertation aloud, hand wrote them with a pen that records and translates my script, or typed it on an inefficient keyboard that is a holdover from the time of manual typewriters. We do know that, whatever technological advances meet us in the future, they will, in the words of Schubert, be mired in the past. No matter how sophisticated, technology will always be a pale comparison to human interaction.

Unsurprisingly, Waldorf Schools do not have one universally agreed and implemented policy concerning technology and media usage. Curricula are being developed and revised to meet the changing climate and conditions in each area where the schools live. Waldorf schools are not anti-computers or anti-technology. Many teachers create a main lesson block on the theme of computers: studying their origin, historical development, and uses in the world; learning about their physical construction by disassembling and reassembling one or more machines; and learning about their functional capabilities through first learning coding language and then writing simple programmes. Only with this preparation is the child truly able to begin to make full use of the technology. Without it, the user is too often simply carrying out the expectations of the computer, or, more accurately, those of its hardware and software makers. Once the learner sees the computer as a tool over which he has mastery, he can use it in creative and unique way that its makers had not earlier imagined. And the stage of human development at which the analytic thinking skills needed to understand this level



of abstract complexity ripen is only achieved in the third seven year phase of life, starting in the fourteenth year. For that reason, Waldorf schools usually teacher this computer main lesson block after the point at which Irish primary education ends, and ICT plays a negligible role in primary classrooms before that.

## 5.8 Summary

When we consider the Primary School Curriculum and the Waldorf approach, we find a great deal in common. The general aims and broad objectives of the Curriculum are compatible with what the literature and teacher interviews tells us is the ethos of Waldorf education.

Examining in finer detail, however, the overall concordance begins to break down. As all school systems would have each their own approach, this is to be expected. Although there is still much in the Skill Development, Content, and Assessment sections of the Curriculum, and in the Teacher Guidelines that corresponds to the methodology employed in Waldorf schools, there is much that does not. Whereas some of the directions inherent in this portion of the Curriculum that are distinct from Waldorf pedagogy can be creatively applied at the recommended stages of a Steiner primary school, the application of others could only be achieved through modifications so extreme as to either thwart the curriculum authors' intent or to compromise the ethos of Waldorf education.

Whether this will be a problem for the Steiner national schools is a question very much open to interpretation. The approaches and methodologies presented in the Teacher Guidelines (1999) are often referred to as suggestions or examples. And, fundamentally, if Waldorf taught everything in the same manner as stated in the Curriculum, it would offer nothing new.

Another problem is where the balance of time devoted to a subject is significantly different, and the most divergent example is Arts, where the guideline in the Primary School Curriculum is for three hours per week of cumulative Drama, Music and Visual Arts. Typically, a pupil in a Waldorf school would receive between six and twelve hours

per week of Arts instruction (Stockmeyer, 1969). Also, unlike the Primary Curriculum, which advocates integrating curricular areas, Waldorf starts from the whole and only then moves to the parts. So, whereas most primary teachers, following best practices recommended by the Department of Education, build up a multifaceted lesson from various elements across curricular areas, Waldorf teachers, working with grand thematic motifs across a horizontal curriculum (section 2.1.4), tease out elements that are useful to meet pedagogical goals. Coming at the issue from this opposite point of view, it is far less helpful to expect teacher adherence to a set amount of time per week per subject area.

As well as a thorough evaluation of the Primary Schools Curriculum from a Waldorf perspective, it would be illuminating to evaluate the Waldorf curriculum from a national schools perspective. Through familiarity with the Waldorf literature, I can only believe that such an exercise would dispel the notion that Waldorf schools sacrifice breadth for depth. A broad and balanced curriculum is considered to be one of eight defining features of the Curriculum, and the initial reports for the Inspectorate find a lack of breadth when evaluating the Steiner schools. The teachers, in response, have argued that what Waldorf lacks in breadth in makes up for in depth. I conclude instead that, whereas the depth is readily apparent on first viewing, there is also great breadth when one looks for it. A large amount of the unique attributes found in the Waldorf curriculum are simply cast aside when comparing the two.

There is a vast amount of unique ideas contained within the Waldorf pedagogical approach that have a long record of success in other contexts. The NCCA may want to consider these methods when reviewing curricula, both for early years and primary education.

# 6 Conclusion

## 6.1 Introduction

By some criteria, it can already be said that the Steiner National schools are a success. Considering enrolment numbers, both of the two Steiner national schools in County Clare are thriving. Each has roughly 120 pupils. In the case of Mol an Óige, that represents an approximate 100% increase since recognition. At Raheen Wood, although the pupil population is much the same as it was when a private school, the age range it caters to since then has narrowed, so the number reflects larger classes. We will have to wait some time for longitudinal studies that will determine their success on a more practical educational level.

In this project I set about first to identify any pedagogical aspects that are unique to or featured in the Waldorf model that are of potential value toward meeting Ireland's educational needs for its children, both today and in the future. Then, I sought to discover if they are compatible with the status quo throughout Ireland. To the degree that any variance goes against what has been in place historically, I attempted to identify ways in which compromise on either or both sides would result in further integration.

One of the greatest strengths of the Waldorf approach is its adaptability both to reflect the cultural values of the peoples in each region of the world and to meet the changing climate of educational needs. Through primary and secondary research, I was able to find many useful teaching techniques and pedagogical paths used by Waldorf educators that fit quite harmoniously and can be readily integrated into the national school system, some of which are worthy of consideration by other primary schools. These include: looping; lesson design without reliance on textbooks; meditation, retrospection, and self reflection; an artistic approach permeating all subject areas; and the integration of religious diversity. There are other unique aspects of Waldorf that would not lend themselves to adoption outside of the Waldorf system. Nonetheless, as they are fundamental to this approach, I feel it would be useful for the Department of Education and other patrons to become familiar with both the rhythmic curriculum development

and the synchronisation of curricular themes with child development aspects of Waldorf education.

Through direct comparison of Waldorf practices with both the Primary School Curriculum and the the rules and regulations of the Department of Education, a number of fundamentally contrasting points of view were exposed. The differences include: curricular variance, which can be subdivided into academic expectations for kindergarten, relative weight of subject areas, and abbreviation of primary years; teachers without Waldorf training; and decision making structure at school level. They might be thought of as trouble spots, because there is both clear divergency and no agreements in place to rectify the situation. It will require compromise if these are not to be lost in the shuffle.

The question of compromise can be understood in the light of ethos, as this is both the defining character of a school and the realm in which the patron is granted a significant degree of sovereignty. It is surprising that the Department of Education has allowed even temporary recognition of not only the two schools, but of their patron, without first acquiring full knowledge of the Waldorf characteristic spirit. It seems clear to me that the ethos of Waldorf Education is the Waldorf pedagogy itself.

From Lifeways, the patron body, a clear statement of ethos is needed. The Department will then need to consider its response, and determine whether it is obligated or willing to enter into negotiations toward identifying and agreeing means by which the Waldorf ethos can be protected in Steiner national schools. Only at that point does permanent recognition make sense.

## 6.2 The Waldorf approach as a means to enliven education

There are a great number of ideas for effective education that Waldorf pedagogues have explored and developed. Some of these are already considered to be best practices within mainstream education; a few are similar to ones once employed more widely in various educational systems that have fallen out of favour and been forgotten; and many have never been applied outside of Waldorf pedagogy. Rather than a categorisation

based on the above, however, I will divide them based on another characteristic which I believe will be a more useful: those aspects that could be discretely applied, and therefore might be of interest to other patron bodies, and those that by their nature are integral to the Waldorf approach, and would not lend themselves to being replicated in another setting.

## 6.2.1 Ideas of universal applicability

### 6.2.1.1 Looping

The looping of teachers with pupils is an idea for which Waldorf is justifiably known (Oppenheimer, 1999), an approach where a primary teacher is expected to teach a group of children for several years. Traditionally, Waldorf teachers in other countries were expected to remain with a group from first class through 'eighth class' (equivalent to the second year of secondary school, when children are fourteen years old). An increasing number of Waldorf schools are significantly reducing the duration of the loop, often splitting the eight years into two cycles, transitioning to a new teacher after fourth class. Many teachers feel that the disadvantage in their being challenged to learn a new curriculum each year is more than offset by the long-term relationships thus established, allowing for more effective and rewarding teaching overall. The pupils move from one class level to the next with a minimum of anxiety and the elimination of a new school year transitional period provides more time for new learning and more effective continuity of curricular content. However, such stability can only come about when all parties maintain healthy relationships, a task requiring dedication. Though still considered extremely innovative and used infrequently (Open Education, 2008), this approach could conceivably be taken up by any primary school.

### 6.2.1.2 Textbook-free teaching

Another aspect of the Waldorf approach that might be beneficial for other schools to consider is the reliance on the individual class teacher to design a unique curriculum for her class, and the resulting extreme limitation on the use of textbooks and

workbooks in the planning of lessons. There is some evidence that the widespread reliance on ready made lessons afforded through the routine use of such books in primary classrooms is beginning to be perceived as a didactic method of teaching, with little emphasis on the development of higher-order thinking skills, on nurturing pupils' creativity, or on encouraging pupils to respond emotionally and imaginatively. The Inspectorate's 2005 evaluation of the curriculum in schools reported that textbooks exert a dominant influence on teaching and learning in a significant number of classrooms (DES, 2005). Two years later, an evaluation of Irish teaching by the same body highlighted negative effects of textbooks on teachers' practice, finding a lack of reflection on the suitability of the content, impacting pupils' performance (DES, 2007).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, which categorically states that neither it nor any other agency has a role in controlling or managing the quality of textbooks published for schools, nonetheless scrutinised their role in a recent report on curriculum overload in primary schools (2010). From the two reviews of the curriculum in schools thus far carried out (NCCA, 2005, 2008) the Council was able to report teachers' perspectives that the extent to which textbooks aligned with the curriculum was variable, and that many lacked sufficient stimulus for children's learning. Teachers emphasised parental expectations as a critical factor in their selection of textbooks and their efforts to complete them. One teacher described the pressure to finish by the end of the year books for which parents had spent as much as twenty euro, even while knowing they provide neither independent thinking or active learning opportunities for the children. The report highlights one school in the national system where teachers restricted their use of textbooks, reported their experience as 'exciting and empowering,' and noted that children were more motivated and involved in their own learning.

It is startling to realise that this approach to creating lesson content almost entirely 'from scratch' is being pioneered in the same Waldorf school system that also uses looping, necessitating that these original lessons are presented often only once in a teacher's career. Also interesting to note in the aforementioned NCCA report is the finding that, although teachers recognise textbooks and workbooks sometimes as being of poor quality and limited support, they continue to use them partially because they are

'more helpful than the curriculum for classroom planning [as the curriculum is] difficult to navigate and to access across subjects and levels.' (NCCA, 2010, p.16)

### 6.2.1.3 Arts as integrating element

Another unique strength of the Waldorf approach strong emphasis on the arts, especially with the younger years. Although this statement can refer to providing additional time in the week for artistic classes, that is not my meaning here, for I do not consider that to be easily adopted in other schools, and it remains to be seen whether the Waldorf schools themselves will be permitted such adjustments to the weekly schedule. For that reason, I take up the matter of additional time for the arts in a later section. Rather, what I intend here is that the arts be used as a method through which any and all curricular content can be enlivened. A beautiful example of this is the writing and illustrating of main lesson books for each subject area. Even a subject as pedestrian as Algebra can be set in pages that have colourful and carefully wrought borders, and perhaps prefaced with a set of computational rules set to verse. And the actual practice of Mathematics can be a multi sensory experience of skipping rope while counting in multiples, using seed pods in a cloth pouch to work out equations, or tossing beanbags while reciting times tables. This leads itself naturally to creating bridges between curricular areas. In this way, not only do the arts serve to potentise the educational experience, but teaching itself becomes an art.

### 6.2.1.4 Meditation, retrospection, and self reflection

Although each individual teacher is free to decide in what way and to what degree, meditation, retrospection, and self reflection are essential to the practice of Waldorf education. Sometimes this can take the form of group study, as when an individual child is the focus of a faculty meditation, and often it is a research tool by which the teacher at the end of the day dispassionately reviews the lessons she taught, searching for ways in which she can become more effective tomorrow. Surely, all teachers in all schools employ self reflective practice to some degree in their work. Waldorf schools cultivate an environment where pragmatic observations, but also imaginations, inspirations and

intuitions are openly shared and valued.

### 6.2.1.5 Integration of religious diversity

The last idea that I have identified as to be potentially beneficial to other schools is the Waldorf approach to religion. At the recent forum on patronage and pluralism in schools, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation called for the abolition of Rule 68 that obliges schools to integrate religion into all subject areas of the curriculum (RTÉ News, 2011). Some parents would like to see a complete separation of the state from the church in national schools, as is the case in most other Western countries. A middle ground would be to find a way to accommodate religious diversity in the classroom, and it is toward this goal that Waldorf education has developed a uniquely child centred solution. It is the child's right as a human being to have religious experience, free of dogma. The Waldorf curriculum honours all religions, recognising that each has an educational truth for the child. Primarily through the retelling of age old stories, the Waldorf educator creates pictures of beauty and deep meaning that convey ideas and moral precepts (Schwartz, 1997). Having arisen in different peoples at different times, this curriculum of the world's stories is ecumenical and at the same time culturally diverse. Because they represent different stages in the evolution of human consciousness and are brought at the corresponding phase of child development, they are also pedagogically potent.

## 6.2.2 Ideas that are Waldorf specific

### 6.2.2.1 Rhythmic curriculum development

A central aspect of the implementation of Waldorf is creating a rhythmic structure to the education that correlates with human and cosmic rhythms of inbreath/outbreath and sleeping/waking. A key dynamic in the classroom analogous to breathing is the balance between focused and less concentrated working. An example of this polarity is the following: having the class echo line-by-line the recitation of an unfamiliar poem is an inbreathing experience, while to engage the children in singing a song that they know



well and is easy for them to sing is an outbreathing experience. To work with the sleeping/waking rhythm of human consciousness has to do with the dynamic of learning and forgetting. To facilitate this process on a small scale, there is a three day rhythm of presenting and deepening main lesson content. The way in which this dynamic is worked with on a larger time scale is the main lesson blocks themselves, in which a subject area is explored intensively for a period of weeks, then left aside entirely while working with some other theme, then met again on a higher frequency weeks later. Waldorf teachers strive to create these healthy back-and-forth patterns within each lesson as well as in the structure of the day, the week and the year (Rawson & Masters, 1997), as it allows for greater achievement with less fatigue.

#### 6.2.2.2 Synchronisation of curricular themes with child development.

Steiner's theory for curriculum sequencing and delivery held that the process of maturation of each child occurs gradually and in a specific fashion that recapitulates the cultural epochs of all humanity (Barnes, 1980). This is addressed in Waldorf through an educational approach that features the Hands Heart and Head sequentially over the first three 7 year stages of life, and, more specifically, by means of a map of historic cultures through which the teacher will lead her class over the course of the primary school years. Though adaptable to different cultural contexts, milestones on this map usually include the Ancient Hebrews for the nine year olds, Egyptians at the age of eleven, and the Roman Empire at twelve. The great value in connecting content to child development is to assure the teachers awareness of the latter while developing the former.

### 6.3 Waldorf and the Irish Curriculum: Trouble spots

Not all of the aspects of the Waldorf approach are in complete harmony with the Primary Curriculum, nor with all rules of the D.E.S. In this section I will identify potentially significant areas of contention, requiring modifications or compromises.

### 6.3.1 Curricular Variance

Because the Waldorf movement has a well defined albeit fluid and adaptable curriculum, it is problematic that the patron body has moved forward in its dealings with the D.E.S. as if there is none. From anthroposophical child development research arises a set of fundamental principles for the content, sequence, and methods of education. Curricula that work against those principles cannot be said to be harmonious with the goals of Waldorf.

The overall concordance between the Waldorf approach and the specific goals of the Curriculum does not extend to many of the finer details. In other countries where Waldorf national schools exist such as Holland and Germany, a full consideration of state curricula from an anthroposophical-developmental point of view has been performed: of every subject area's learning outcomes, at every age level, with a reasoned response whenever argument is found, and alternatives proposed. To carry out such a project here would constitute a task of such scope as to likely result in documentation as lengthy as the Curriculum itself. This articulation of the ways in which the Curriculum can be met (and, indeed, enhanced) through a Waldorf approach could be taken up by the Department of Education, the inspectorate, the NCCA and individuals with Waldorf expertise.

It would be unfortunate if Waldorf-methods teachers learned to adapt lesson content and schedules for the sake of meeting the expectations of the Inspectorate, so as to be able to 'tick all the boxes', to 'fake it' in such a way as to meet the letter of the law. Such capitulation would in time be woven into the very fabric of the school. Waldorf offers a new way, if allowed space to be 'something else,' in the primary education landscape. How much latitude will be granted to diverge from and reinterpret the curriculum is a key question. Only time will tell.

#### 6.3.1.1 Academic expectations for kindergarten

Recent developments suggest that this issue may, to a significant degree, resolve itself. Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework moves away from 'schooling' the

under sixes, instead focusing on the importance of play and informal learning. Indications are that this document might be seen to supplant or modify the Infants portion of the Primary Curriculum, a move that would bring the state expectations closer to the Waldorf methods. But school inspectors might still view as inadequate the pre-literate, oral approach adopted in Waldorf infant education, and the same concern might be raised about other academic requirements suggested in Aistear. Though counter to the uncompromising stance of the Waldorf as a whole internationally (Alliance for Childhood, n.d.), it appears that Lifeways and the Steiner early years teachers might be willing to compromise. Mol an Óige now offers a transition class to children in their last months of kindergarten, where they spend time sitting at desks and initiate some rudimentary book work. It remains to be seen, however, whether Raheen Wood will adopt a similar programme, and whether school inspectors would recognise this as adequate compliance, or indeed adopt a unique criteria by which to evaluate these schools.

Waldorf schools offer a child centred, developmentally appropriate, non-analytic approach to early years education with well-tested viability. The NCCA could acknowledge that a completely non-analytic approach to early years is worthy of consideration, and utilise the Waldorf schools as pilot projects to study this alternative approach. Having only recently completed the Aistear documentation, however, this does not seem likely in the near term.

### 6.3.1.2 Relative weight of subject areas

The Introduction to the Primary Curriculum contains a recommended schedule of the minimum amount of time that schools should plan for each subject area each week. Due to the wholistic nature of the Waldorf main lesson, which is given two hours each school day, it is awkward to attempt to quantify subject areas in this way. A typical main lesson will include significant portions devoted to at least three of the subject areas, and some main lessons will include all eight. On rare occasion, such as a trip to the woods for a Botany lesson, the full two hour period may be spent on a single subject. Bringing any attempt to quantify subject areas on a weekly basis into further disarray is the rotation nature of main lesson themes, where Geography might hold the lion's share of

lesson time for one month, and get hardly a mention for the next month. It would be possible to roughly approximate the amount of time devoted to each subject area in the integrated main lessons over period of months, and then divide again to get weekly averages.

There is a dearth of documentation of Waldorf pedagogy and ethos in a modern Irish context. Perhaps this arises from the 'living' nature of the approach, but the lack of definition makes the Department's responsibility to the taxpayers for quality assurance very difficult to carry out. It may be possible for the Waldorf patron to document curriculum in such a way as to find balance between the need to know what can be expected and the need of the children to have creatively engaged and lively teaching. Perhaps an alternate learning outcome schedule aligned with Waldorf pedagogy could be agreed if, at the completion of the primary years, the Primary Curriculum expectations were met or surpassed.

### 6.3.1.3 Abbreviation of primary years

In a lecture given to Waldorf Kindergarten teacher trainees in March of 2008, noted educator and author Eugene Schwartz stated that, in his opinion, although it is ideal for a child to receive a Waldorf education throughout his school years, if it can only be for a limited time, that is tolerable, for 75% of what is truly essential for human development is included in the Kindergarten years.

I believe that he meant not that the rest of primary and secondary is unimportant, but less crucial than the early years. So the question of whether children transition from primary to secondary at age 12, 13 or 14 is one that Waldorf pedagogy does not hold so strong a position on that various solutions could not be entertained.

The traditional Waldorf curricular journey arising from an anthroposophical picture of development posits the class six guiding theme as the Roman Empire and the Medieval Era, class seven as the Renaissance, and class eight as the age of Revolution and the Modern Era. Unlike Germany and the United States, Ireland only has six years of primary schooling, the same as England. In England, the Waldorf schools continue up

to class eight, and pupils either continue in Waldorf secondary or join the local school two years into the secondary cycle, and something similar happened here when the Irish Waldorf schools were independent. As national schools are expressly forbade from keeping their pupils past class six, the Steiner national schools are faced with a dilemma. The traditional Waldorf journey will be cut two years short, leaving the pupils in the fifteen century. Picking up the pace would have the advantage of covering the evolution of culture in its entirety, but at the expense of developmental accord, and only by squeezing the other years back to make room. To my knowledge, this challenge has not been addressed.

### 6.3.2 Teachers without Waldorf training

There is a growing problem of teachers employed in the new Steiner national schools who lack Waldorf training. Three years ago, 64% of the full time teachers at Raheen Wood and Mol an Óige schools were trained and experienced Waldorf teachers. Today, it is 27%. That number would be even lower if Raheen Wood did not privately employ two teachers, using community funds. The Inspectorate has informed Raheen Wood of its view that, regardless of who pays the salary, anyone teaching children in a national school must meet qualified teacher status criteria, and has asked that these two teachers be replaced.

When accepting temporary recognition, the patron body of the two new schools, Lifeways Ltd., agreed, in accord with the Department of Education and Skills' rule for all national schools, to only employ candidates with recognised teacher qualifications. At the same time, the viability of Steiner nations schools is predicated upon the majority of teachers in these schools being trained in the Waldorf approach, and the D.E.S. currently recognises no Waldorf style teacher training as valid. To implement this requirement is proving to be a great challenge.

Long term solutions to support national schools working through Waldorf pedagogy in creating fully Waldorf-qualified faculties will have to be found, including the development and certification of a Waldorf-based initial teacher training in Ireland, whether it be as a unique stream for a Bachelors of Education degree or as a post

graduate programme. In the shorter term, the only workable route will be firstly for the Department and schools to enter into an arraignment whereby teachers hired with state credentials but without training and experience in Waldorf methods are supported (both financially and in scheduling) toward an ambitious course of continuing professional development. The second avenue is to allow the hiring of Waldorf teachers without full credentials, and to give them similar support in coursework to achieve qualified teacher status. To pursue this course, the schools would need special dispensation to go outside of normal hiring criteria. That may be an unusual request, but an important one.

Employment equality legislation expressly allows religious schools to discriminate on a wide range of religious grounds in the matter of selection, promotion and employment of teachers (RTE News, 2011). This is justified as a means to assure the protection of the patron's ethos (originally thought of as a religious one), which is required by law to permeate the whole school programme (INTO, 1991). Although the potential discrimination is incompatible with section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, the Equality Authority has thus far failed to react against it. It could be that this conflict was in mind, however, when the Steiner national schools were informed by the Department of Education and Skills that no pre-existing requirements concerning Waldorf orientation can be allowed to effect hiring practices. Obviously, such an additional requirement for employment in Steiner national schools would have been more a matter of job qualifications than discrimination. The edict brings into question the patron's ability to protect its ethos.

### 6.3.3 Decision making structure at school level

The decision making structure at individual schools in the Primary school system is developed in such a way that the Board of Management (with one teacher as a member) decides most aspects of school policy, and the principal teacher decides how to interpret and implement the policies in specific cases. Conversely, in Waldorf schools there is generally a division of responsibilities into Legal, Financial and Pedagogical, with the first two under the rubric of the Board of Management, while the last is entrusted to the faculty body, often referred to as a College of Teachers. Rudolf Steiner was adamant that, for the school approach that he envisioned to be successful, the teachers

themselves would have to share the responsibilities for running the school. What is lost in the efficiency of mandated leadership by an individual is more than gained in the shared ownership of the entire school experience that arises from the work of finding consensus, and the comradeship that can result often echoes in the classroom, directly benefiting the pupils. Many issues that face the school overlap the above categories, at which times the two groups can either work together or cede responsibility for decisions to one another. The College meets weekly, usually for at least two hours after school, effectively adding two weeks onto each teacher's workload each school year.

As a compromise, the two Steiner national schools employ principals and assistant principals, but they continue to reach most pedagogical decisions by consensus of the faculty. The principal and assistant principal of primary schools the size of the two Steiner schools can receive a 30% to 100% increase in pay as a result of holding these positions (DES, 2010), while the difference in responsibility and work load between individuals in these positions and the Chair of the College of Teachers (a volunteer position that often rotates among the faculty year on year) has more to do with clerical work and figurehead status than actual leadership role.

To my knowledge, this state of affairs has caused no external friction among the faculties of the two schools to date. Nonetheless, some teachers have intimated that they view the pay differential as inappropriate. If the Department of Education and Skills were willing to allow the schools themselves to determine the distribution of this incremental increase for leadership as they collectively saw fit, it would better facilitate the continued implementation of this crucial aspect of the Waldorf ethos. The sanctioning of intra-school redistribution of salaries is very unlikely, given the structure of educational funding, however. Beyond the aspect of pay, the D.E.S. could approve an alternative non-hierarchical school structure, if it was clearly presented and demarcated in the Lifeways statement of ethos.

Another potential challenge to the culture of Waldorf primary school teaching is the choice of individual teachers to join the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, an outcome both understandable and inevitable. The work-to-rule action of 2010 which banned meetings outside school hours showed that membership in such a union can be

problematic. It can be hoped, though, that over time, as the Waldorf schools grow and become more firmly established and known within the wider educational landscape, their unique concerns and need will be increasingly advocated by their union representatives.

## 6.4 The question of ethos

Ethos, or characteristic spirit, is an important concept in the understanding of education in Ireland. Its legal definition is found in the 1998 Education Act: "the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school."

Primary schools in Ireland are required to ensure that the ethos of the school patron permeates the whole school programme. Until now, the government has given schools near complete autonomy where religious matters are concerned, and a fundamental rule for national schools (Rule 68) states that 'a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school'. Any description of ethos for Waldorf schools would start with an anthroposophically derived view of child development and the pedagogical necessities that arise from it. It is unclear how much latitude is to be granted schools to fulfil their specific ethos beyond a narrowly defined religious element.

It may be that both the national curriculum and other operating procedures required by the Department of Education reflect in their very design the ethos of the Catholic Church and the few other patrons that have acted as partners in the development process. Bringing the Waldorf perspective to the table highlights concerns that, rather than starting from a neutral position, the fundamental culture of primary education in Ireland to which all patrons are to adhere, and into which to build their own characteristic spirit, expresses assumptions about education and the nature of child development that should not go unquestioned. The Patron Body of Waldorf needs to state its unique ethos and pedagogy, and to actively assure that these are implemented in Steiner National Schools.



In correspondence with Lifeways, Ltd. concerning the application for Mol an Óige and Raheen Wood in the lead up to recognition in 2008, Jason Kearney of the School Planning Department wrote the following:

The central issue discussed was the response taken in the light of the latest correspondence from the prospective Patron, it was concluded that the central issue was the commitment from the prospective Patron to comply with the national curriculum and other Department of Education and Science requirements particularly as it would involve the schools engaging in a transition phase from their current private school to operation under the national school *modus operandi*'.

More recently, in a June 2011 circular entitled New Arrangements for Patronage of New Schools, the Department restated this expectation in this more general context. when it identified as requirements to be satisfied by prospective school patrons confirmation of willingness to operate by the rules and regulations laid down in D.E.S. circulars and operating procedures, to follow the prescribed curriculum, and to operate within the resourcing and policy parameters established by the Department (DES, 2011).

If the State is financially supporting and validating the schools, it is reasonable for it to expect Waldorf schools to adapt. Some of the changes required could prove to be beneficial in making the Waldorf schools more effective. However, if difference of ethos is not respected and understood, the requirements of the State might compromise the integrity of the Waldorf schools.

I would encourage both sides to meet further, to develop a stronger understanding of the applicability of Waldorf in the national school setting. Complete capitulation by the Waldorf movement to the dictates of the curriculum as it is written would do a great disservice to the children who attend these special and unique schools. Hiding the differences and claiming compliance is also not a valid option. These differences shouldn't be swept under the rug. The Department of Education and Skills could negotiate concessions to protect the Waldorf ethos and characteristic spirit (both the VEC and Educate Together won similar concessions), recognising the validity of application of the Steiner Waldorf approach in its schools, and consciously make

allowances for the ways in which it differs, while reflecting upon those differences, evaluating their usefulness, and considering the application of elements within other schools.

'The inspectors are very happy that we are working without workbooks,' one Steiner national teacher told me, while another said, 'the inspectors want us to draw out information from the young children, and I have good reasons not to'. The degree of latitude should not be left up to individual inspectors, when assessing schools that employ a distinct pedagogical approach. Rather, a discussion should take place between the Inspectorate and the patron directly, and allowances and understandings should be recorded and referenced in all future inspections. National schools adopting Waldorf pedagogy will need to be inspected by knowledgeable Department of Education inspectors, who recognise and honour distinctions between the Waldorf approach and the mainstream. Additionally, to assure that they are in fact implementing a Waldorf pedagogy, they will need periodic all school assessments by a body representing the international Waldorf movement, such as the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship of the UK and Ireland.

If, contrary to what the schools have assured their immediate communities, the D.E.S. has no intention of allowing pedagogical variance, referring to these schools as Waldorf or Steiner schools makes no sense. A school that follows a curriculum other than Waldorf is not a Waldorf school. There is little evidence, however that these schools are being encouraged or even permitted to approach education in a way that is substantively different from any other school in the country. The ideal of choice remains elusive.

Without some agreed pedagogical compromises from the government, this partnership will result in the assimilation or annihilation of the Waldorf impulse in these Steiner national schools. The recent establishment of a forum on primary school patronage by Education Minister Ruairi Quinn could herald a new time of opportunity for progressive reform.

## 6.5 Conclusion

There are over 1,000 Waldorf schools internationally, and the movement has many advocates. In the opinion of Willy Brandt, former Chancellor of West Germany and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, the advent of the Waldorf Schools was “the greatest contribution to world peace and understanding of the century” (Waldorf Answers, n.d.). Some schools serve very specific and unique cultural situations, such as the Lakota Waldorf School on an American Indian reservation, and the Arab-Jewish Waldorf kindergarten in Jerusalem. The educational impulse has huge popularity when adopted for use in home schooling, and is used in children's programmes in homeless shelters and with juvenile offenders in a court-mandated programme in California. Most of these initiatives reflect the melting pot of cultures that can be found in any large community today, the world over. It is a great strength of Waldorf not only that it is multi-cultural in outlook, but that it can be adapted to serve the educational needs of any culture. Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of *The Magical Child and Evolution's End*, sees in the Waldorf movement an approach that “is designed entirely to keep children intact until they are ready to move out into the world as whole individuals” (Waldorf Answers, n.d.).

As most Waldorf schools are privately funded, the cost of tuition makes it challenging to avoid financial elitism, though this is the opposite of Rudolf Steiner's intention. One of his central ideas is that education, and all of cultural life, should be a matter of truly free choice for all children and families, and not be determined by economic privilege or by the state. What is often overlooked is the other side of the equation: these independently funded schools, while striving to keep tuition fees low, routinely round off as many financial corners as possible, a general policy that has a dramatic dampening effect on the salaries of teachers (Lamb, 2004).

One attempt to address this dilemma has been to introduce Waldorf methods and principles in public schools, as found, for example, in the growing charter-school movement in the United States. Another approach is to provide taxpayer funding for established Waldorf schools. Many European governments subsidize private schools, in some cases ceding to them responsibility for not only curriculum, but internal teacher

certification, relative rates of pay, and school decision making procedures. The populace of each country already pays for education, through the tax base it generates. Eliminating the requirement that parents pay a second time makes Waldorf education accessible to all. It also allows the teachers there to be paid commensurate with the teachers in other schools.

Ironically, perhaps the greatest challenge to Waldorf education in this country will prove to be the recognition by the Department of Education of two Steiner schools. The interviews I undertook for this project repeatedly showed risk of teacher burn-out from the huge pressures to deliver both a full Primary Curriculum and a full Waldorf curriculum, and to do so 'without a map'. Raheen Wood Steiner National School will start its fourth year with its third principal. As a member of the school community, I am aware of some degree of parental disillusion, where the contracts of much loved but unqualified teachers have not been renewed, and worrying signs of becoming 'just like the national school down the road' often identified and discussed. And, from the other side, the Inspectorate continues to find more to fault than praise, without enough confidence in either community to move the schools into permanent status, leading to a continuation of the historically unprecedented category of 'temporary recognition'. At the same time, everyone seems to agree that the children are happy, healthy and satisfied, and there are many new families at both schools who say they are only able to enrol their children without the burden of full fees.

Another consensus understanding is that there is no going back for these two schools. If the financial support of the state were to end, a divorce instigated by whichever side, it would mean the dissolving of these two school communities. If true compromise cannot be reached, Waldorf education will be obliged to divorce itself from the state, as Lamb recommends in his book titled *The Social Mission of Waldorf Education: Independent, Privately Funded and Accessible to All* (2004). But if that happens, it will only resurface to meet the needs of tomorrow's children. It may be the knowledge of this that prevents the communities and their patron from clearly stating their requirements.

When I speak of permanent 'recognition' by the Department of Education and Skills of the Steiner national schools, I use the word in the limited sense of official approval,

funding, and acceptance into the system whereby schools' success is assessed by measurements adopted by a centralised executive authority. There is another meaning for the term *recognition*, of course, one that if applied here could turn into a great opportunity for Waldorf education in Ireland: that of acknowledgement, to perceive anew. If these schools were encouraged and nurtured to offer a uniquely modern Irish version of the Waldorf approach that has won such favour throughout the world, it would be a useful addition, and a true choice in education for parents. But it could be much more than this. Waldorf could help to renew and enliven the mainstream, too.

A full consideration of all the evidence shows that the time has assuredly arrived for Waldorf schools to take their place as a educational choice for the people of Ireland. The current arrangements between Lifeways Ltd and the Department of Education, however, do not safeguard long time viability. It is my hope that the patron will soon clarify fully its ethos and pedagogy, spurring the Department of Education and Skills to take an active interest in this educational model, and to provide specifically in its rules and regulations for its unique approach.

The last word I will leave to Dr. Steiner:

“Whenever I come to Stuttgart to visit and assist in the guidance of the school, I ask the same question in each class, naturally within the appropriate context and avoiding any possible tedium, ‘Children, do you love your teachers?’ You should hear and witness the enthusiasm with which they call out in chorus, ‘Yes!’ This call to the teachers to engender love within their pupils is all part of the question of how the older generation should relate to the young.” (Steiner, 1924, p.133)

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# Appendix

## Questions for interviews with practising Steiner Waldorf national school teachers

Please identify some aspects of the Steiner Waldorf education that lead to more effective teaching in your classroom.

Has your teaching approach changed as a result of working through the Primary School Curriculum? If so, in what ways has it changed for the better? Has it hindered your teaching?

In what ways does teaching without textbooks and researching your own curriculum add to or detract from the teaching and learning experience, both for the pupils and for yourself?

Have you had to make compromises in Waldorf pedagogy (as you understand it) to meet the Department of Education and Skills' requirements?

Are there dangers the Waldorf ethos faces as it moves into the mainstream?

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